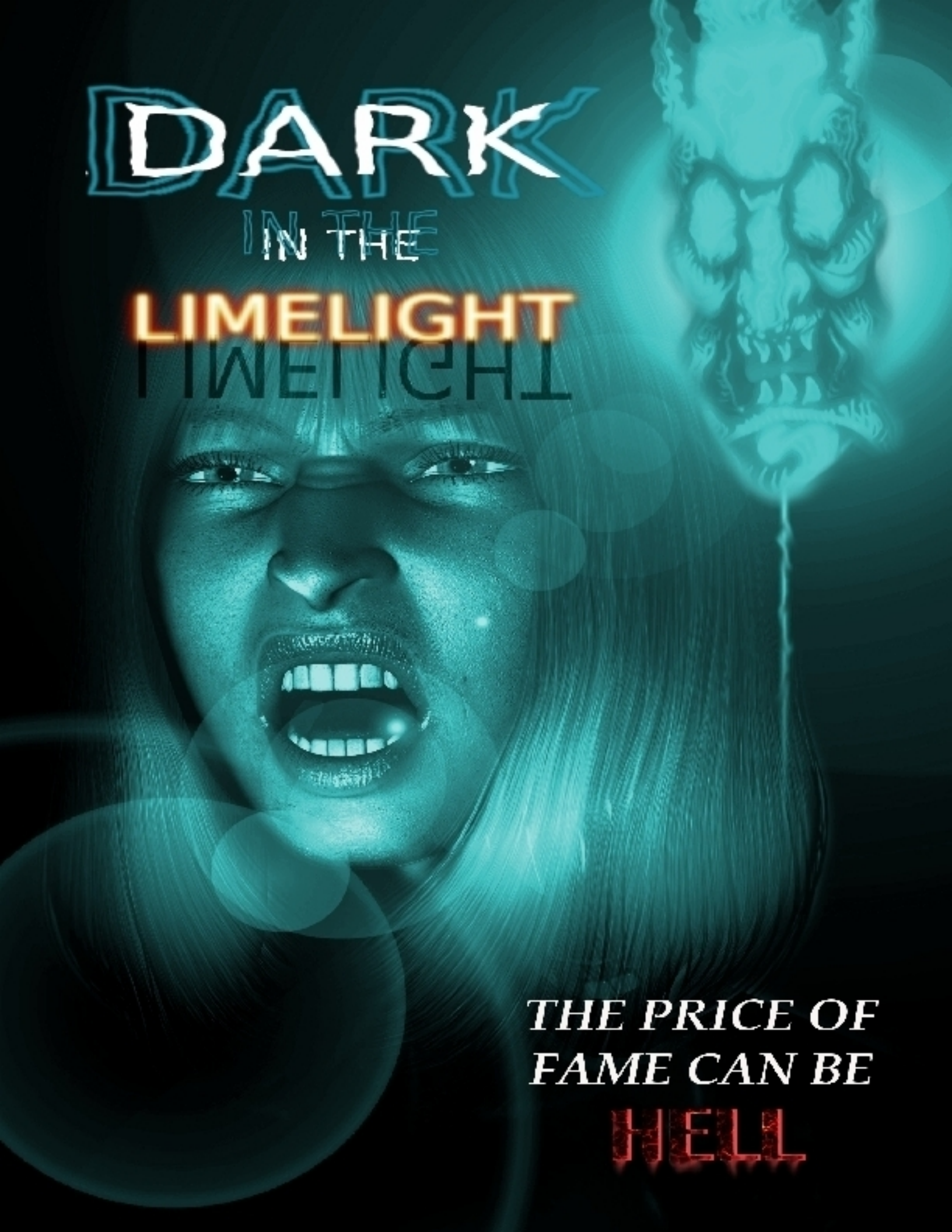
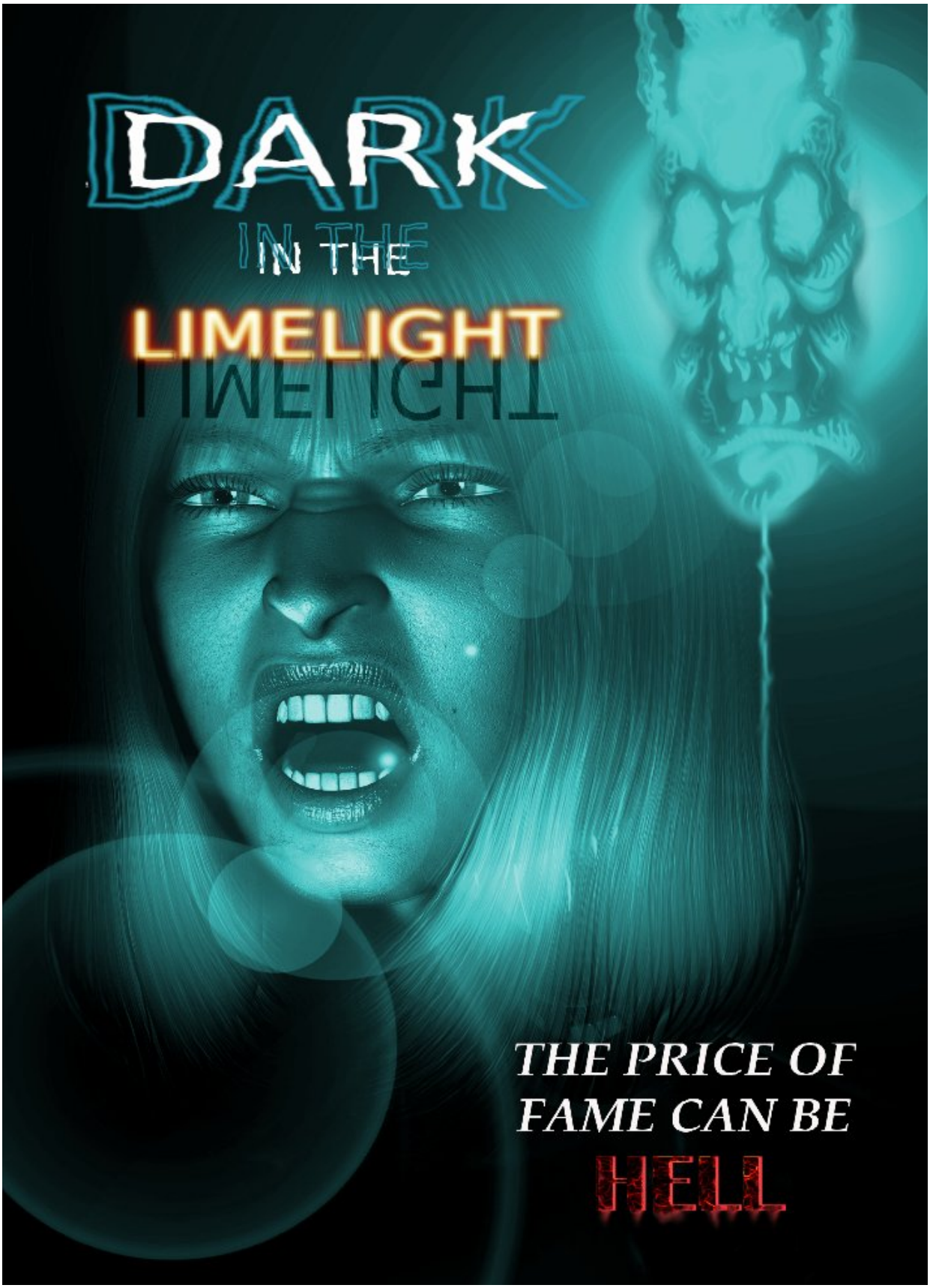

DARK
IN THE
LIMELIGHT
THE PRICE OF
FAME CAN BE
HELL


DARK
IN THE
LIMELIGHT
THE PRICE OF
FAME CAN BE
HELL

DARK IN THE LIMELIGHT

The Price of Fame
Can Be Hell

Edited
By

Gavin Chappell

COVER ART

Chrisharvey
Jasonjung

© Dreamstime Stock Photos & Stock Free Images

"Curtain" by Salvatore Vuono

© freedigitalphotos.net

GRAPHICS

Nathan J.D.L. Rowark

First Edition

Horrified Press

© Horrified Press

All rights reserved.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner
without written permission from the publisher.
All characters appearing in this work are fictitious.
Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

FOREWORD

A big thank you to all the wonderfully talented authors who have given their time, their effort, and their genius to this horror collection of truly remarkable fiction.
Also, a big thank you to our supporters...

Schlock Webzine
www.schlock.co.uk

Kind of a Hurricane Press
www.kindofahurricanepress.com

Dark Gothic Resurrected Magazine
bloodtouch.webs.com/darkgothicmagazine.htm

Dark moon books

www.darkmoonbooks.com

Scarlett River Press

www.scarlett-river-press.ca

We hope you enjoy this blood-curdling collection of twisted and terrifying tales, and feel free to check out more titles from Horrified Press in the future.

Table of Contents

A FLAW IN THE RECORDING
Jacurutu: 23

A SPRINT THROUGH A HOUSE OF MIRRORS
Ken L. Jones

BLOOD BATH
Angela Bodine

BLOOD, SWEAT & TEARS
Nicky Peacock

DEMON IN HIS SOUL
David Perlmutter

DETACHED
Mark Slade

DRESSED FOR SUCCESS

Mathias Jansson

HOPELESSNESS IS THE NEW HEROIN CHIC
Will Millar

KISSING OFF AMBER
Ken Goldman

LET THEM EAT CAKE
Rob Smales

NIGHT OF THE HIDDEN WAG
Shaun Avery

PREY FOR THE DEVIL
H. I. M. Hortenzia I Moscato

STAGING WITH THE DEVIL
Sergio “ente per ente” Palumbo

SNUFFED OUT
Adrian Ludens

SUFFOCATO CLAMORIBUS
Benjamin Welton

SWAN SONG OF ROBERT ENSLIN
Matt Hayward

THE BLUE-EYED DEAL
Greg McWhorter

WITCHBONE
Greg McWhorter

THE GREAT MARBELLA HUTCHINS
Scathe meic Beorh

THE INGÉNUE
Pepper Scoville

THE MAN WHO SOLD HIS SOUL TO WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
David Landrum

THE NEW MODEL
Matthew Wilson

THE REPO-MAN
Carl Fox

THE KNIFE
Todd Nelsen

TRINKET
Gary Murphy

A FLAW IN THE RECORDING

By

Jacurutu: 23

I am going to tell you just how fucked you are.

Nothing is left to chance. The video games you play…are carefully crafted by "My Parents" … The insects manifest themselves through the executives of the six multinational media corporations that own it all.

The Borr'ians are the humans here who know how to use all the tricks and the things you just laugh off as bullshit. The use of astrologists in the stock market. The precise use of Feng-Shui in siting corporate headquarters and arranging office layouts. Or the use of NLP and Ericksonian hypnosis, motivational gurus and occult jargon. All used to corral you.

And believe me; no doctor will give you a prescription that you actually *need.*

The phone rings three times, triggering your implant.

I used a time cloak to slip away. It uses light to tear holes in time...it can cloak 46 per cent of the entire time axis and conceal pseudorandom digital data at a rate of 12.7 gigabits per second. It gave me just enough time. I had planned for years.

I had grown up in the Order. Bred specifically with the DNA to be made into the new breed of Insect person. Crawling micro-organisms spread like ink into every aroused pore, from skin to bloodstream to brain, like a fever.

Genetically modified by ballistics experts for anti-zen/anti-purity of purpose, the next step in bullet evolution that waited patiently to be born and to slide from its steel canal, joyfully burrowing through the atmosphere at twenty five hundred feet per second in search of a human host. The infant slug knows it can only successfully impregnate its chosen president if his head is made empty of all thought; otherwise, there will be no room there for the shell to grow to maturity and riflehood. It's delicate, improbable work, impregnating a man from space with bullets.

Instead of being a bullet in a gun to be fired by the Borr'ians I wanted a say into what I was to be. Free will. It was a "flaw" in the DNA. I was my

own trigger mechanism, to go off when and wherever I chose.

I could see everything within the other dimensions. The hinge between different temporal dimensions is so smooth that it implicitly forces us to question the hold of this very dimension "we" call reality. Spatio-temporal dimensions lapse into each other, absorbed by the black hole of n-parallel worlds. Regurgitated, they resurface with fantastically bewildering warped appearances.

My own physical transformation gifts me with sudden 360º insect vision, however, and I'm unable to ignore the sight of something that looks like a pterodactyl raping and gutting a young couple on their honeymoon. In wraparound multiple compound lens vision.

In the space that fills the gaps in our jostling schizomorphic skyline, the negative sun, blue and boiling with ten billion Hiroshimas per square inch - is fertilizing a barely struggling infant B-type star. Ever since the original sun became host to parasitic Quasar pulses containing the unstoppable viral consciousness of Azathoth the Nuclear Chaos, these astronomical rape pageants have become more and more regular. Watching the filthy old neutron star tease younger suns into its seedy gravitational field - some as young as 30 million years - is a sight to attempt to forget for the rest of your life.

Everything you did was collected and compiled. You could literally be rewritten if they chose. A curious glance at the digitally-counterfeited 'celebrity porn' sites on the Net will reveal, to your undoubted delight or dismay, that Famed Philosophers Faking is not so far from the truth of the labyrinthine byways of alt.sex. No-one is safe any longer, no image beyond capture, dissection and proliferation, no text sacred and inviolate. A dignified, elderly scholar is easily implicated in a pornographic scam or sampled and condemned to rap on a club track. You have long ago already agreed to become fair game for cameras, computers and wire.

So, aside from insulating yourself with lead shielding, there is really very little you can do to prevent your next door neighbor from snapping a series of digital photographs of you. There is nothing you can do to stop him downloading his results and morphing your head onto the shoulders of onto someone else for purposes of sexual arousal. The Borr'ians would feel your shame. Hardcore Disney.

The telephone rings four times. A synthesized Hawkings-voice, monotonous, triggers the implant.

The Machmen machines are not designed to hurt you.

Do you love yourself?

Do you have sexual dreams?

They led the Borr'ians to the emotions you would create that they fed off of. They harvested them.

You had a perfect life that you thought you always wanted. 2.5 kids and a wife. But you had to pay for it. You had perfect everything but with a hint of it not being real somehow. Too perfect.

Desire.

Desire for a beauty manifested in unconventional and subversive shapes. A nymph with strange fleshy excrescences growing undisturbed under her skin. A dreamworld. You could have it if you just signed your name on the dotted line.

The Great Old Ones from the Outer Dark, the Skeletons in the Cosmic Closet, the Forgotten, the Withheld, the Lloigor, the whole obscene, transcendent Anti-Pantheon from Spaces Beyond and Between...

All real.

All time and space bent back and snapped, credit card-style. Einstein's universe, fucked like your sister by ravening cosmivorous theorems and feral mathematics of the ninth dimension. I was supertuning my biological spectrum to a rate of ten thousand phyla per second.

The world had invited the Borr'ians. You created the environment they could prosper within. Serial killers etching novels by the light of purple candles in the locked bachelor pads that line the infected Sewers of the Qlippoth. Blood in the inkwell, the pen never runs dry.

Like everything else, the Borr'ians run the latest hot-spot nightclub in this city. The angles are all wrong but non-Euclidean geometry is the only way to pack in the thousands-strong crowd. It was the place to be. The Valor-level priest is a sickening fermented thing that combines in his DNA all the worst aspects of Insect, Plastic and various and that's the way he likes it. Tonight he's gnawing holes behind the walls, creating freakish geometrical aberrations into which he'll pack more customers.

Squeezed into prisms, labyrinths, clusters of unlikely cubes and planes in the unending mathematical intricacy of the club are the clientele; a scintillating cross-section not only of the Quarter's bohemian nightlife but also of a higher-dimensional omnifunctional entity which the Borr'ian

priest serves in his capacity as familiar. Everyone who is everyone is here tonight, in the most literal sense.

I spotted what was the nerdiest guy in the school, transformed by the gifted surgeons' knife into a spoiled, stunning model girl, and exhibited as a living erotic sculpture. Couldn't be shut out of the reality film.

I will kill them all for being so stupid.

It will all be captured and recorded. As advertised on TV, the new Polaroid digital camera comes complete with a precision lens meticulously razored from the living eye of the freshwater dolphin, Toru.

I will photograph you into a new plane of existence and free you.

You are a slave. Do you think for a moment that you can ever really say or do what you want? You can't dream without fear of punishment, even if it is your own hypodermic guilt making you look to religion, drugs or suicide as an escape. Trust me, I know. I was bred to rule over you.

Because a fragmented mind is unable to make intelligent and wise choices. Multiply the scenario by a couple of generations brought up on genetically manipulated food and attention span-decreasing technology and you have a pretty accurate overview of the impending apocalypse. Which will, of course, be both televised and streamed.

DNA was very much the recording - the tool of control….and mine was carefully crafted to ensure that I would control as part of the new breed of Insect People. However, there was a flaw in the recording.

You will never learn. Smile for the camera.

About: *Jacurutu 23*

Contact Jacurutu3@yahoo.com 513-543-6642

"I WOULD IMAGINE MYSELF OUT OF THIS.....AS I ALWAYS HAD, AND ALWAYS WOULD."

Founder of Tribute Championship Wrestling. Pro-Wrestler. Audio-researcher. Smut peddler. Protégé of Genesis P-Orridge / founded the One True Topi Tribe alongside Gen.

He lives with his 43 cats in Tokyo, Japan.

Jacurutu:23 is a self-described “Scissorman”, one who cuts up and reassembles sound, video, art and reality itself to suit his own means. He is a professional wrestler, an audio-informant with numerous releases as Jacurutu:23 and under several other aliases. He founded the Life-power church as a pro wrestling faction, built upon the ideas developed in his self-published first book in 2009, The Scissor Bible, (a book of continuous writing.) which has been reprinted as part of his biography "I HARDLY KNEW ME". He works closely alongside artist and "wrecker of civilization" Genesis P-Orridge as an archivist of Gen’s 50 plus years of creative works and together they founded the One True Topi Tribe. He has worked writing storylines as well as performing for numerous professional wrestling organizations, including his own, Tribute Championship Wrestling, writing a year’s worth of storylines in advance.

http://genesisporridgearchive.blogspot.com/

OTTT access point www.Topinetwork.com

www.jacurutu3.com

A SPRINT THROUGH A HOUSE OF MIRRORS

By

Ken L. Jones

The master bedroom was heavy with skulls, antiques, dust and the things of childhood. The décor of Bert Corwin's sleeping chambers was a thing of frustration to his wife Rachel, who would have preferred it to be more normal. Rachel had never understood why Bert needed a bedroom like this. The room reflected the pluralities of Bert's interests and temperament. Sprawled about it were Disney pennants, framed original comic art pages, thousands of color comic books, record albums, antique books, toys, knickknacks and bric-a-brac. Bert saw the room as a kind of monument to the popular culture of the world, but to his wife it was a thing of impossible clutter that could never be dusted or properly organized.

What especially made her uneasy was her husband's predilection for skulls and skeletons. Any toy skeleton, plaster skull, rubber Halloween skull or skeleton that Bert had ever been able to lay his hands on was tucked into every available crevice and milk-crate bookcase in the room. This skeletal motif added an eerie tinge to the celebration of childhood things that comprised most of the rest of the room's élan. The preponderance of death's heads in their bedroom represented a morbid preoccupation to Rachel, which she saw as an attempt on Bert's part to be gross and offensive. Bert however often told his wife that his skeleton collection represented a sort of Zen symbolism to him and that it was a conquest of his personal fear of death.

There was, however, underneath it all a childish undercurrent that went back to his infantile fixation on such things as werewolves, mummies, vampires and the other denizens of his lifelong cold sweat nightmares. The room was alternately cuddly and threatening, and it flashed from fear to joy with the unexpected swiftness of a child's mind. The most offensive thing in the room was its centerpiece, which was a real human skull. It had been given to Bert as a going-away present when he had quit his job as a grade school janitor and went full time as a cartoonist.

The skull had once been the property of an aged first grade teacher named Hansel Vonderhoof who had been Bert's best friend and confidant during the ten years that he had labored at the low paying and degrading job of day janitor. Old Hans had always encouraged and befriended Bert, who visited him on a daily basis as he cleaned up his room in the morning before the children arrived for class. Hansel was very well-read and loved the world of literature; he was very taken by the fact that Bert was well-educated too, loved books and wanted to be a writer someday himself. Hansel was a bit put off by the fact that Bert wanted to write comic books, which the old man thought of as being for children and illiterates. However, after Bert explained patiently how adult and well written modern comic books were and loaned him some copies of *Maus, The Watchmen,* and *The Dark Knight*, the old man was soon convinced of the validity of all this and became very supportive of Bert's many attempts to break into print.

Now, during their many early morning conversations, one topic reigned supreme, and that was Washington Irving's immortal *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, which both men were obsessed with. Bert could truly say that it was his all-time favorite story in all of literature. The Headless Horseman scared him more than any other monster, which was saying a lot because he loved monsters or anything even resembling them and always had and always would.

For his own part old Hans was even more obsessed, although all of his attention and interest seemed to focus on *Sleepy Hollow* and nothing else. Truly the man could be called an expert on that subject and he knew and could discourse with great enthusiasm on the topic with Bert, who was more than eager to engage in such conversations. Old Hans knew strange and stunning things about the story and the characters involved in it and often reminded Bert that it was based on real people who had once lived.

Thus it wasn't exactly peculiar that when Bert went searching for subject matter to turn into his own original comic book series, he chose to do an extrapolation of the Headless Horseman that he dubbed The Hessian. The story was set in modern times and concerned an action movie star and former stuntman who accidentally became merged with the specter of the Headless Horseman because of the crash of a UFO he was chasing on his motorcycle. The conglomerate being that arose from this unholy accident became a modern day version of the Horseman who rode through our world dishing out a horrible vengeance on all who cross his path.

Old Hansel seemed very tickled by all this from the first rain-drenched gloomy morning that Bert told it to him while he was cleaning his room. With each passing day he egged the younger man on to flesh it out and to find someone to publish it. With Hans's constant encouragement, Bert whipped the character up into presentable form. After being rejected by several of the bigger, more established publishers, he approached his own hometown publishers, a new company called Image. He knew some of the locals who owned it. Since Bert was not only a good comic book writer but was one of their homeboys and drinking buddies, his series was soon accepted and prepared. The preorders and general buzz on The Hessian were very good so Bert prepared to start a full-time career as a comic book writer.

Now every day for years, Bert had admired a real human skull which sat prominently on Hans's small desk at the front of the room. Early on Bert had told him of his love of skulls and skeletons, and how he had a huge collection of toy and fake ones at his home. Bert had often asked the old man how he had come into the possession of such an item, but Hans was vague and only once or twice had he slowly whispered that it was his. Since they often teased and kidded each other, Bert had more than once made a wisecrack about how Hans must be a serial killer and how the skull in question was one of his hunting trophies.

Whenever Bert did this, Hans would pout and wouldn't speak to him much for a day or two after that. Yet in general most of the interaction between the two had been one of happiness and camaraderie. So it was that when Bert had left the school for greener pastures the elderly man had given him the best going-away present that he received that day. The authentic and never quite explained human skull that Bert had so long admired was now his.

Rachel, of course, was far from happy with her husband's latest acquisition. When he showed it to her that evening, she was very vocal about not wanting it in her house. Bert ignored her constant carping and over the next few days it became a symbol of both what he had left behind and the world of vast imagination where he was now going to boldly seek his fulltime income. To express his joy at having it, he showcased it dead-center in the master bedroom in a milk-crate book modular all by itself.

Rachel, of course, was extremely creeped out by this turn of events. She began to notice that wherever she happened to be in the room,

especially when she was lying in the large double bed, the skull seemed to watch every move and motion that she made, almost as if it still had eyes. Now this angered Rachel more than she could find the words to express. She especially felt strange and almost dirty being naked or even semi-clothed around it. Worse than that, she couldn't shake the feeling that the thing was leering at her whenever she and Bert made love. She most especially felt this odd sensation when the room was pitch-black and the lights were out.

Bert, however, refused to listen to any of this. He loved having the skull in his house and he came to regard it as some kind of a rabbit's foot or a four leaf clover. As a consequence of all that he was accomplishing, he was invited to be a guest of honor at the world famous San Diego Comic Con. This was not only a big boost to his budding career but did wonders for his self-esteem too. The period between when he first received this all-expenses-paid invite and when he actually went there was very work intensive and productive, but at the same time was a period of great unsettling in his home life. Rachel did not like having him work at home. It was a great disruption of her formerly orderly life. Bert kept strange hours and seemed constantly underfoot and in the way and was so absorbed in what he was creating that he seemed to have little time for normal family activities anymore.

Several times during this turbulent period he would vanish into the bedroom, sit on the edge of the bed and stare intently at the skull that Hansel had given him. On several occasions Rachel had heard him having an animated conversation with someone in the bedroom, but when she went to investigate further found no one there. Of course, all this newfound strangeness put an even greater strain on the couple's former domestic bliss, and they began to constantly quarrel. Worse than the fighting was how each of them now seemed to want to undermine and outdo the other, if only because they wanted to prove who was really in charge of their family now that it seemed to be disintegrating so rapidly.

As the San Diego Comic Con approached, their quarreling became more and more intense, and they had a terrible row right before Bert departed for the event. Over the several days that he was gone, Rachel stewed and steamed over what their life had devolved into. The more she thought about it the more she came to blame the skull that old Hansel had given her husband, and so on the day before Bert was to return she entered

into a rash and impulsive act. She was in the process of washing their bed sheets when for the thousandth time she felt the skull leering at her as she bent over to remove the dirty bedding. With great deliberation she decided to get rid of it. She couldn't just throw such a thing away because she was afraid that someone might see her or stumble onto it and they might contact the police wondering what all this was about. For a time she thought about burying it in their huge backyard, but the Corwins had a rambunctious German Shepherd dog that spent most of his waking hours digging things up back there, so she knew that that wasn't a good idea either.

Finally, she hit on a plan. After looking him up in the phone book, she invited the old school teacher to come by for a visit that afternoon, telling him that she had a problem that she needed help with. Since her interaction with Hansel in the past had always been pleasant and she considered him to be a reasonable gentleman, she was convinced that if she explained the situation he might be willing to quietly and confidentially retake possession of the offending gift.

When her husband returned home she would tell him a big story about how she had forgotten to lock the front door when she left to go grocery shopping, and how some thief or vandal had entered into the dwelling and made off not only with her husband's prized skull but several other items in the house too. She planned to hide these from him to make her cock and bull story sound plausible.

Hans arrived clad in a nicely tailored jogging suit. Rachel invited him in, explaining that her husband was away on business at the San Diego Comic Con. They exchanged pleasantries for a time over tea. Then finally clearing his throat a little, Hans inquired about the nature of his visit. As if in response Rachel removed a large throw pillow on the couch next to her which hid the skull that Hans had given her husband. She held the bare cranium up in her hands.

"I hate this dammed skull. There has been nothing but trouble since he brought that evil grinning thing into our home. I know it sounds ridiculous but I think it's the cause of all of our problems. Can you please take it and never tell my husband that I gave it back to you?"

Hans's face grew stormy. Something about her even suggesting this upset the old man greatly, and he didn't try very hard to suppress his displeasure. Hans's voice dripped with venom. "The skull was my burden,

but no more. It is now where it was long meant to be and it must remain so if I am ever to know any kind of peace or final rest after all these years."

At hearing Hans's strange refusal Rachel lost the last shreds of her composure. Without thinking she reared back and threw the object at the old man with all of her might. The skull connected with the side of his face, then fell onto the thick carpet with a loud thud. Rachel let out an intense gasp of horror when she saw that it had torn away a big hunk of Hans's face. Squinting harder at the old man's features she realized that they were part of a very intricate latex mask such as children often wore trick or treating. Overwhelmed by an over-powering desire to see what lay hidden beneath the mask, she leapt onto the startled Hans and began to pull the torn rubber appliance from the old man's head. Hans struggled feebly against her grasping rending fingers but no matter how hard he tried, he could not hamper Rachel's frantic steady progress. When she had accomplished this she couldn't believe her eyes. She stared down into the empty stump where his real head should have been. Backing away in horror and revulsion she inadvertently stepped on the mask which had once concealed all this. She was surprised that when she did so, it disgorged very old newspapers and ancient torn pages of textbooks which gave it its convincing and human dimensions. The very act of doing this caused it to dissolve into some kind of a gray powder that still retained something of its former continence and general shape. The headless thing cackled madly as it advanced upon her, backing her into a corner.

It growled menacingly, "You really should not have done that. After all, you do remember what happened to Pandora, don't you?"

Her mind half shattered already Rachel could only mumble, "Who… what are you?"

Hans answered with a voice that had long lacked vocal chords. "My real name is Crane, Ichabod Crane. Yes, you think you know all about me, but little of what has been circulating around is true. It's mostly that Irving fellow's fault. He always was more interested in getting a laugh than in relating the awful truth. Maybe he felt like his audience wasn't ready for more than that. In my long life I approached Poe and Lovecraft both about getting my real story out, but they had concerns and obsessions all their own that they were too busy working out to care about any of that. There were a few others too but I doubt that you have ever heard of them, but then I met your husband. He and I first had contact when he was in the fourth

grade. I was a substitute teacher for his Mr. Fuentes back then. One of the assignments that day was to read and talk about *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. My god, I never met anyone more obsessed with it than he was. As you can imagine I soon realized that I had finally found the one I was looking for."

"The one?" Rachel croaked out of the driest mouth that she had ever had.

"Yes, the one. The one to pass the skull along to, just as the Horseman first passed the curse of it along to me, two hundred years ago. Can you imagine wanting to die and not being able to, with no real head to call your own while you were walking around undead? What other hell could compare to that? Soon your husband will take my place and then like the Horseman, I too will finally be allowed to transition off to where I should have so long, long ago. But there are still a few details to be taken care of before that can happen. You are the largest of them. I had no idea that you might prove to be such a problem, but then that part of my story was true - I never did understand women, did I? Look at what hellhounds my love for Katrina Van Tassel put on my tail. Oh, that I never heard of the fair sex in the first place. You're all nothing but trouble every last one of you."

He came closer to her with his long arms outstretched.

Rachel shrank back in horror as the headless corpse shuffled towards her. She tried in vain to summon up a scream in hopes that someone might save her, but this was not to be. The old man who had once been a schoolteacher named Ichabod Crane crushed the life out of the terrified struggling woman with great deliberation. As he did so he savored the event like some might enjoy a gourmet meal. He would have smiled at these proceedings if he still possessed a mouth to do so. Finally finishing his not unpleasant task, he bent down and restored the skull to where it had formally sat. A half an hour later, when he exited the house, he had a large plastic bagged bundle in his outstretched arms. He placed it in the trunk of his car as he hummed a favorite hymn of his that he had first learned in a century long past.

When Bert wearily returned home, Rachel was nowhere to be seen. He was very troubled by that. Nothing like that had ever happened in all the long years that they had been married. The trip to San Diego Comic Con had been amazingly fun. Truly it was a weeklong ride on a merry-go-round designed by Hieronymus Bosch, but all of that partying and being feted as a

new superstar had taken a year or two off of his life. All he wanted now was to crash and sleep straight through for the next forty-eight or seventy-two hours, but he couldn't because he was very troubled about where his wife might be. In spite of that he sat down on the end of his bed and began taking off his very expensive Reebok tennis shoes. As he did so he found himself staring straight at the skull that old Hans had given him. Impossibly, it seemed to be grinning at him now.

Then it dawned on him, so hard that it made him feel sick to his stomach. Rachel was so fed up with him and hated their new life together so much that she had done something desperate. She just wasn't anywhere to be found in the house anymore and he didn't know exactly what that meant. All he knew was that he had made the wrong choice by not placing her first. Looking at the skull again, it actually seemed as if it was laughing out loud at him now. Red with rage, he arose to his feet and picked up the offending collectable, which seemed to be trying to bite him now.

He reared back with all of his might and shrieked, "I wish I had never heard of you," and then slammed it with all of his force into the wall, shattering it into a dozen fragments. As he did this, a vortex of multicolored lights seemed to engulf his house and everything in it. Bert felt himself beginning to lose consciousness.

When he awoke he was in his tiny custodian room, sitting in the chair there. He felt as if he was coming out of some very deep sleep. He prepared to go back to work but still felt groggy. Shaking his head to clear it, he noticed that he was in front of Hansel Vonderhoof's room at the elementary school he had long worked at. A terrible rainstorm was forming up and a long day lay ahead of him. He sighed as he picked up his vacuum and wished he had some other way to earn a living. He stopped for a moment as if an idea was going to form. When it didn't, he went into the dark room, flipped on the light and began to push the vacuum around the room. Somehow in his most secret of hearts he knew that this was going to be the longest and most tedious workday that he would ever know.

About: *Ken L. Jones*

For the past thirty plus years Ken L. Jones has been a professional writer who has published in practically every medium that a writer

can appear in. Among his earliest and most noteworthy accomplishment was as a cartoonist of note whose scripts appeared in the titles of such major publishers as Disney Comics and Harvey Comics where he was a lead writer for The New Kids On The Block family of titles. In the last few years he has shifted his emphasis to writing speculative fiction and horror short stories as well as very well received poems of horror which have appeared many times in anthologies and online and which also resulted in his first solo book of poetry *Bad Harvest and Other Poems* which was released by Panic Press. He also recently had a poem published in *Poised In Flight* from Kind Of A Hurricane Press. In addition to all this he currently is constantly turning in new horror poems to George Wilhite's *Long Intervals of Horrible Sanity* blog which features regularly updated selections of his latest visions of terror. You can find it at http://georgewilhite.blogspot.com/p/poetry-by-ken-l-jones.html. In spare moments he is also preparing several books of his non-horror poetry work for possible future publication.

BLOOD BATH

By

Angela Bodine

Simone had been on the red carpet before, many times, but now she was on *the* red carpet. The red carpet at The Baths. Not many were lucky enough to have this experience. There were no flashing cameras here, no Gucci and Versace and Chanel. No starlets. No starstruck. Just a long, narrow carpet that stretched into a grove of strange trees that bore large, black leaves and had thick trunks bent like old women.

She took a deep breath and raised her chin. She even smiled a little, posturing for the cameras that weren't there. No one had had to teach Simone how to pose. It was bred in her; she was the purest pedigree of star, born of a rock star father and a model/actress mother. Her genes were perfect. She was made to be famous.

But Hollywood had a secret, one that would never be leaked to the tabloids. It wasn't about who was dating who, or what actor was going into rehab, or what singer had been arrested for urinating in public. Oh no, the secret of The Baths was better protected than the secret of the Holy Grail, and some whispered it was just as ancient.

Simone began her strut down the red carpeted catwalk of The Baths. Her feet, beautiful and beautifully manicured, were tucked into a stunning pair of Louboutin heels. She didn't stumble once, not Simone, never Simone. She glided across the carpet with grace and ease. If there had been anyone present, she was sure they would have been in awe of her elegance and poise, not to even mention her style and timeless beauty.

But there was no one around. Not here. Her son was back at the main spa, with the Bath workers. They were strange creatures, to say the least, and they would have unnerved anyone less poised and polished than Simone. They had, indeed, unnerved her when she had first visited The Baths years before.

***

“Mom, I’m scared.”

“Shush, Simone. You hold yourself together. I’ve taught you better than this.”

Simone shushed. But she couldn’t withhold the trembling.

It had begun when she had woken to find herself being lifted out of her bed by her mother. She had been alarmed, confused. Her mother never touched her unless they were in public, where the paparazzi could photograph her lavishing affection on her daughter. Simone clung to her mother’s neck, and allowed herself to be carried from her bed, from the house, and to a waiting limousine. Once in the limousine, her mother had emotionlessly pulled several items from a large Gucci handbag. An eight inch piece of cloth and a syringe filled with a red liquid. Simone had begun to cry and her mother had only given her five words of explanation before tying the cloth around her daughter’s arm and injecting her with the syringe: “We’re going to The Baths.”

Simone had only woken up twice, once on their private jet and once on the back of a donkey atop a dizzying trail somewhere grey and mountainous and bleak. Both times, her mother had been ready with a syringe and Simone’s uncontrollable trembling had fallen away into unconsciousness.

She had awakened at The Baths. The trembling resumed before her eyes had even fully focused.

It was a strange, exotic place. The Baths were made of earthy materials. The walls were rock and timber, but mismatched. Here, black obsidian and oak. There, huge boulders and bamboo. The floor was sheer rock, hard and unforgiving, but somehow etched with the most amazing and archaic and chilling symbols that Simone had ever seen. There was no roof. The night sky peeked down on them, but even that was unfamiliar and strange. Simone had never seen so many stars; she was too used to the air and light pollution of the Los Angeles sky. The only furnishings in The Baths were just that: baths. They seemed to be carved out of the same natural stone as the floor, all three etched with those strangely unnerving symbols on the floor.

“Strip,” her mother commanded.

“Mom?”

“Don’t ask. Do.”

Her mother's tone told her there was no room for arguing.

Simone began to unbutton the designer pajamas that she had received just three days prior at her Sweet Sixteen. Her hands trembled so badly that it was no easy feat.

When the Bath workers appeared, her hands froze on the buttons of her silk pajama top; she was unable to look away from the awful beings.

They were about three feet tall, humanoid, but their arms dangled almost to the ground. Instead of skin their bodies were covered in dark, sharp-looking scales. They had no hair on their heads, or anywhere else, and no discernable ears, noses or genitals. Their eyes were awful. They were human-like, but without the eyelids, so that the organs seemed to stick out of their sockets grotesquely, bulging orbs of whiteness in stark contrast to the dark scales that covered their faces.

The Bath workers, about a dozen of them, appeared as suddenly and uninvitingly as cockroaches. They surrounded the first bath, ignoring Simone and her mother, filling it with steaming liquid from buckets they carried.

"Mom!"

This time Simone couldn't help herself: she clutched at her mother in fear. Instead of hugging her back, her mother peeled Simone's arms off of her and bodily moved her away. Holding her at arm's length, she looked her straight in the eyes and said in her severest tone:

"Stop this foolishness now. Listen to me close; I am only going to say this once. You are going to do everything they want you to. It's not bad. You're just going to be bathed. It's happened to a lot of us. This is *how* we get famous. This is where we gain all of our glamour and jenesequa that makes everyone in the world want to be us. So, stop whimpering. Think of it as your Coming Out party."

Simone's hands did stop trembling a little, but it was probably more from shock than from a calming of her nerves. She stared at the little creatures diligently filling the rock crevasse and hugged herself.

"Is this really happening?"

Her mother didn't answer her. She took a few steps away from Simone.

"Wait!" she cried. "Where are you going? Don't leave me!"

"*I* have my own spa to go to." Her mother's voice held dangerous impatience. "This here is for you, Simone. *I'm* going to walk the red carpet.

That's where we go when we've reached the pinnacle of our careers. You'll go there one day, if you can stop whimpering long enough to learn what it really takes to be a star. Now, I suggest you strip like I told you. If you don't do it, they'll do it for you."

And without so much as a glance back, Simone's mother walked away. She went around the creatures filling their bath and through an archway built of twisted palm fronds. Simone noticed that there was, indeed, a carpet where her mother walked. And it was red. It should have looked out of place in this strange and exotic setting, but there was something fitting about it, like this was the red carpet's natural surroundings, instead of awards ceremonies and movie premieres.

She then noticed that the creatures had finished filling the bath and were turning towards her. She hurriedly stripped her pajamas off as they swarmed around her like scuttling cockroaches, leading her to the bath.

The first bath was easy. It was just hot, steamy water. She soaked in it while she watched the creatures fill the second bath. Once filled, they gestured for her to get in. She did so quickly, before any of them could touch her. The next bath was filled with some thick, shiny yellow liquid that made her think she was bathing in golden mercury. Her bath there seemed endless, and it didn't help that the fumes from the steam made her feel light-headed and woozy. Then, it was back to the first bath.

She was in the hot water again, and didn't object when the creatures began scrubbing her body clean. She still felt a little foggy from the second bath. They abandoned her to fill a third bath, the only one she hadn't been in yet.

This time, she had to be carried because her legs refused to work. It took several of the small creatures to convey her to it. She didn't cringe away from their touch; The Baths had made her incredibly relaxed, body and mind.

She rested in the final liquid, this one red, feeling the most tranquil she had ever felt, serene but comfortably invigorated.

"You guys could make a killing in Beverly Hills," she murmured dreamily.

The creatures worked silently around her, scrubbing the liquid into her skin and face, washing her hair with it, even cramming it into her ears. One pushed the liquid into her mouth so she could drink it.

When her mother returned from the red carpet, the only part of Simone that wasn't bathed in blood was the whites of her eyes.

***

Simone had arrived.

She thought nothing of her teenage son back at the main spa, probably just now settling into the second bath. She was entirely focused on her own journey and where it was leading her.

She had walked the red carpet through the strange, gnarled landscape until she reached a large hut made of dead weeds. The red carpet disappeared into the hut, making her think of an open mouth with a lolling tongue.

She felt a twinge of excitement. She had always wondered what would await her at the end of this red carpet, *the* red carpet. Now here she was, ready to receive whatever it was she would receive for her fame and stardom. What could be even greater than her fame? What could be even greater than *her*? Immortality? The meaning of life? A rendezvous with a deity?

She entered the hut with all the poise and grace and beauty that she would enter any black-tie event with.

They fell on her before her eyes had time to adjust to the darkness. Her clothes were torn off by awful scaly hands and suddenly she was lying naked and trembling in the dirt on the floor of the hut. She was held down not by hands but by some unseen force.

"No. You can't do this to me. I'm Simone. Don't you know who I am!"

The Bath workers were silent.

She saw a pale form propped against the edge of the hut. It wasn't a Bath worker; it looked like a naked woman but where its face should have been it was just empty, like smooth rock. She thought it was a realistic mannequin until she saw the chest smoothly rising and falling.

"I don't understand."

But when they began to cut off her face with an unbelievably sharp scale, horrible realization dawned on her.

They chanted. Simone screamed. It was her greatest performance, but she received no accolades for it. They ignored her and she watched in

stunned terror. She watched them put her face, just a thin flap of bloody flesh, on the form slumped in the corner.

Simone felt the scale cut her arm, and looked down to see one of the creatures filling up its bucket with her blood. She was shocked beyond pain.

She noticed two things before she passed out. One, the first bucket filled with her blood was being carried out the opening of the hut and down the red carpet, only to be replaced with another. Two, the form in the corner had begun to rise.

All went black.

Simone had arrived.

About: *Angela Bodine*

Angela Bodine currently lives in the mountains of West Virginia with three monsters she calls her children, a spoon gremlin, a temperamental muse and plenty of ghosts. When she's not working, chasing heathens or pursuing a degree in psychology, she keeps sane by writing or reading. You can find her at angelabodine.wordpress.com

BLOOD, SWEAT & TEARS

By

Nicky Peacock

The elastic in the push-up bra caught on her ribcage sending a familiar spasm of pain through her shoulder.

"Son of a bitch!" Tiffany pulled at the material in a desperate bid to have it rest on bone rather than flesh, but somehow it always managed to root out the sore spots on her body, like the *anti-masseuse,* then would nestle in for the duration. She suspected that it really wasn't wardrobe's fault and that the lingerie malfunction was more down to the director who liked his actresses busty and alert.

"Tiff, you're on in five." The assistant director briefly bobbed his head into the trailer's doorway; he lingered only long enough to admire her half naked silhouette then was back out onto the set.

Tiffany didn't bother replying, he was already out of earshot and probably didn't care if her boobs were pushed halfway to her eyeballs, or that her knickers were riding into her butt crack like a cowboy into the sunset. She had a familiar mantra for times like this: *Blood, sweat and tears*. All of which she'd shed to be stood in a trailer at Tracker Studios, dressed like an obscene Barbie doll waiting for the cue for her bra to pop off. She was lucky, she knew that; she'd gone into acting as a child and it had taken thirty years to get her here, and of course all those droplets of blood, sweat and tears. Now she was famous, films, talk shows, talent shows, comedy sketches, she'd done it all; so why had her agent booked her as a walk-on for a slapstick sex comedy? Inwardly she blamed the 'Carry-on' films, it was their success that had spawned a rippling mass market for double entendres and pratfalls. Alas, it was the 1960s now and the sprawling glamour of Hollywood had run its course; cheap, cheerful and cartoonish was the order from the British film production companies.

Grabbing a pink nylon robe, whose static aggressively tickled her skin, Tiffany dashed toward the film set.

"You okay?" Christine, playing the nation's new Queen Elizabeth in the parody 'Ooer Missus, What A Coronation,' took her cigarette out of her

mouth just long enough to ask. It was odd how young she looked; only a few days ago Tiffany had seen her out to lunch looking wrinkled, haggard and at least forty; now she looked smooth and young and just shy of her twenty first birthday.

"Wow, you look great, Chris! What's your secret?"

"Oh… I went to this spa."

"Where is it?"

Christine didn't stick around long enough to answer; she wafted off in her see-through nightgown to coo at the director.

"Bitch," Tiffany whispered. She then looked cautiously around her.

With a puff of stale-smelling powder and a layer of foul-tasting red lipstick Tiffany was where she wanted to be, in front of the camera. She delivered her line with expert ease, her bra popped off and her arms sprang up to ensure only a hint of nipple. The director laughed, clapped his hands and yelled, "Cut!"

Scene over, Tiffany pulled on her nylon robe again and watched as Christine giggled with the make-up lady as they looked over in her direction. She remembered when she had been the one to laugh and point at the old woman on set. She strained to hear the director's whispers, she caught something like, 'We'll have to put a gauze over the lens,' then felt a stab of a hot tear as one pushed its way out of her eyeball, taking with it the remnants of her crumbling black eyeliner and thick mascara. Turning, she grabbed a cup of tea from the snack table and dunked three sugars into it.

"Anyone ever tell you to take it easy on the white stuff?" The tea lady cackled like a cartoon witch then began placing cookies in an elaborate semicircle. Enraptured by the fan of cookies, Tiffany barely noticed the director. "Oh Christ! Look, Tiff, go home, get some sleep and come back after the weekend." The director eyed her. "Yeah get some sleep." He then started ogling Christine. Tiff couldn't help but notice that, for every giggle, Christine had a boob jiggle that echoed it, bitch.

No one spoke to her, so she slunk off back to her trailer. Once there she got dressed and sat staring in the mirror waiting for her agent to arrive. It was not so much time that had taken its toll on her; it was more a mixture of late nights and early mornings, too much champagne and not enough fruit. Rich food that stayed in her system only long enough to touch her stomach lining. Then there were the drugs. How could something so white and clean be so evil? Destroying her complexion and cracking the veins in

her eyeballs, giving her a slightly tired look no matter how much rest she got. Wrinkles were developing around her mouth; the sun had tanned her skin too many times that it was now leather and the bags under her eyes were like satchels. Panstick would only cover so much.

"Hey, Tiff!" Jonny, her agent, bustled into her trailer without knocking.

"Hey." She turned and gave him a weak smile.

"I said I had a surprise for you, sweetheart…"

Wrinkles be damned, she couldn't stop her grin. Last time he'd said that she'd bagged the lead in a Bond film.

"What is it?" She jumped up and down, her boobs bruising her ribcage.

"I got you…"

"Yes?"

"...a weekend at a spa!" He produced a silvery brochure and waved it at her.

Tiffany narrowed her eyes and took the brochure. The spa was called the 'Like New Resort' and it proudly showed pictures of half naked nubile young men and women all looking wonderful and happy, drinking fruit juice and nibbling vibrant celery with undue enthusiasm.

"Okay, I'll get a bag from home and…"

"You won't need anything. Everything is already there for you, sweetheart. We're going now."

"Now?"

"Yeah, that way you'll be back for your next scene and looking radiant."

***

It took three hours in her agent's Mini Cooper to get her to 'Like New'. It was literally in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by farmland and dense woods. Breathing deep, she tasted cow shit on the air laced with a subtle note of poppies. It reminded her of when she was young and would stay for the summer with her Nan; warm days filled with fumbles in the barn and hearty meals.

Upon arrival the first thing she noticed was the building was plastic-like, shiny and new. It bounced the rays of the setting sun across it, making

it look like a mirage against the rolling miles of nothingness around them.

"Umm, are you staying too?" Tiffany raised an eyebrow.

"No, no. I'm just dropping you off."

"And picking me up?"

"Yeah, of course, sweetheart." Jonny looked away for a second. "Let's get your bag and get you settled in."

"But if you leave, I don't have a car. Do they have a private car for getting out and about?"

"Yeah, yeah. Course they do. What kind of three star dump would you expect me to book? It's five star plus all the way, Tiff. Nothing else would be good enough for my star client." He grinned and Tiff could see the gold fillings clinging onto his crumbling molars.

"Okay." She gracefully swept out of the car, agent behind her carrying her one bag. They walked the couple of yards to the front of the building. The closer she got, the more she realized just how new this building was, almost prefab in its construction and its gaudy red and white paint job made it stand out against the natural landscape like a sore that had been picked at till it bled.

Inside there was a waiting area and a single woman sat on the couch. She had a floppy hat and a tight fitting catsuit that told the secrets of her every curve.

"Welcome!" A man appeared from behind the counter with all the flourish of a cheap magician.

"Tiffany," Jonny said, his eyes lingering on the woman sitting quietly on the couch.

"Of course we've been expecting you." He rustled some blank papers, then grinned. "Are you happy to take back Ms Black?" He motioned to the woman on the couch.

Jonny smiled and held his hand out to her which she gently took and stood up. Tiffany choked on her own spit. Ms Black looked just like her, only about twenty years younger. It was uncanny, even down to the eye colour.

"Well, then. See you later, Tiff." Jonny placed the bag on the counter then put his arm out for Ms Black and walked her out the door.

"Umm, who was that lady?" asked Tiffany, her eyes momentarily hypnotized by the rhythm of Ms Black's walk.

The man behind the counter grinned. “Why, she’s your replacement, dear.” He rummaged in the bag and started taking out wads of ten pound notes.

“My what?”

“Replacement! You can’t go on looking like that.”

“Like what?”

“All old and saggy.” He spread himself over the counter, folding his arms and laying his head on them.

Tiffany, wide eyed, turned and ran out the door just in time to get a lungful of exhaust fumes as her agent and Ms Black sped away into the distance.

Finding it hard to catch her breath, she threw up her hands and covered her eyes. *This can’t be happening*, she thought.

Laughter behind her made her turn. The man from the desk was there. Now he didn’t have the desk for cover she could see he was dressed in a white plastic suit. He was tall too, and his smile was as plastic as the suit he wore.

“What’s going on?” she screamed.

“Oh my, no wonder you were brought here. You really are as dumb as a post.”

It was then that she noticed the knife he now had in his hand. It wasn’t long but it was thick and jagged with a handle that looked almost homemade.

Tiffany could feel her high heels sinking into the mud beneath her, the chill of the wind rushing her face and tangling her hair and she could sense the trap that had been sprung around her. Of course, they couldn’t replace her if she was still around. How many others had they swapped over like this, other actors and actresses left in favour of a younger model? She stepped back away from the plastic man, stumbling as her heels caught on the mud.

“Oh, do please run. We have acres here to play on, and I do so need the exercise.” He jiggled his belly with his free hand and grinned again, the knife limp at his side.

If she ran she wouldn’t get far, that much she knew. Years ago she’d made a B-movie slasher film and found herself running through woodland in a prom dress and five inch heels – it had took too many takes to get the chase right as she kept falling over and the masked axe-wielding maniac,

called Kevin, had inadvertently kept catching up with her. Instead, keeping eye contact with Plastic Man, she bent and took off her heels, her nylon-clad toes squelching into the mud. She then ran at him. He was bigger, weighed more but was caught off-guard and so she managed to spin him round as she sprinted for the door of the building. Once there she slammed it shut and locked it. She heard him yell out, but she didn't stop to hear what it was he had said; she had to keep moving, find a phone and get help.

Inside the reception area there was only the desk, which held blank scattered papers, the bag of money and the couch. The front door was vibrating with violent thrusts; Plastic Man was throwing himself against it and yelling. He must have come from somewhere... She jumped over the counter and saw a small door behind it. She opened it and ran the length of a white corridor behind. It was almost like a hospital and it smelled of thick bleach. Her feet, covered in mud, were leaving a tell-tale trail of footprints, but she didn't care. Instead she pushed forward till she was at the end of the corridor, with a choice of three doors in front of her. She picked the one on the right, but it was locked, so she tried the one on the left and it opened. It was dark inside, so she fumbled with the light switch. Her fingers curled around it and she pulled it on. Instantly she wished she hadn't... In the room were five tables, all plastic. Each table had a jumble of bodies... no, just human body parts. They weren't covered, they weren't whole and some still dripped. Stifling a scream, she edged toward them. She recognized the first decapitated head she saw as that of Terry Gold, an actor she'd worked with many years ago. Next to him was Janet Crane, another well known actress. The others were too mangled to identify, and after seeing the first two pieces of mangled flesh, Tiffany didn't even want to try anymore. There were no other doors in the room, so she scrambled back out. The nylons on her feet giving her little traction on the plastic floor.

Swallowing down a dry retch, she turned and sprinted back out the door, the smell of fresh human meat still tickling her nostrils. She tried the locked door again, this time throwing her weight against it. Outside, Plastic Man had stopped yelling and was suspiciously quiet.

"Is someone there?" came a familiar voice from the other side of the locked door.

"Hello?" Tiffany whispered.

"Tiffany?"

“Christine!” She recognized the voice immediately. No wonder Christine had looked so good; she had already been exchanged.

“Help me, Tiff. I can’t get out.”

“I can’t get the door open.” Tiffany shook the handle then kicked at the defiant door. “Stand back, Chris.” A crack and a crunch from reception stopped her, mid-kick. Plastic Man was inside. “Shit, Chris he’s coming.”

“Don’t let him get me!” Christine screamed.

Tiffany stopped and listened. “Shhhh, Chris.”

“Don’t let him get me again.” The sobs vibrated through the door.

“Again?” Tiff stumbled backwards, just as she saw a flash of white plastic appear down the hall; carefully she slipped back into the room housing the various body parts.

It was dark, so she hid behind one of the tables; only then did she see that she had left the door slightly ajar and a thin beam of light was all but pointing to her hiding spot.

Curled into the smallest ball she could, Tiffany listened as Plastic Man rustled up the corridor.

He stopped at the three doors then jangled some keys.

“No, no,” cried Christine.

As he opened her door the cries became louder. There was a sickening rip of meat and bone, then a gurgle. Christine screamed again and Tiffany found that the noise was still making it through her hands that were clamped about her ears. She wanted to close her eyes too, but she had to watch that thin strip of light, because if it expanded she knew he had found her. There was another cry and the sound of metal scraping on plastic. What if Christine yelled for Tiffany to help her? He’d know she was near… but she didn’t. Instead there were more sobs and sickening sounds that seemed to last for hours. Then…nothing.

She strained to hear as he stepped out of the room, closing Christine’s door behind him. He started whistling Sandie Shaw’s ‘Puppet on a String’ as he disappeared back up the corridor.

Slowly, Tiffany edged toward the light and peered through the gap. She could see that the other door was also slightly ajar. A trap? But she couldn’t help it; the soft whimpers of Christine still came from it. She had to help her.

Scrambling on the plastic floor, Tiffany kept low and scurried across the corridor into Christine’s room. It was lighter there and as her eyes

adjusted to the new level of exposure, she wished she'd stayed outside.

Christine lay across a table that had plastic clasps to hold her wrists and ankles in place. She was stretched at awkward angles and her clothes were shredded. She was still alive, barely. Tiffany could see that some of her bones were poking out all wet and white, some cracked, some sawn off at the joint. Every human liquid imaginable: blood, sweat, tears, piss, pus and even semen stained her white flesh.

Her eyes flickered open and a tear escaped. "Tiff?"

"I'm here; I'm going to get you out." Tiff pulled at the plastic restraints but her fingers slipped on the blood. Her vision blurred and she was half listening for Plastic Man to come back. Was it a trap? A warning? Or maybe a vision of her bone-protruding fleshless future?

The myriad of wounds glistened with foreign bodily fluids and the chalky white of bone could be seen dotted amongst the many shades of scarlet. Christine's breaths were shallow and part of her lung poked out as it inflated beneath one of her cracked ribs. As Tiffany wrestled with the plastic clasps, Christine reached out and gripped onto her wrist, false nails breaking and bending into Tiffany's delicate flesh.

"Help me," Christine whispered. Her eyes were stark and devoid of anything but pain.

Tiffany struggled free. Help was not an option. Christine couldn't be carried out. What was left of her was all but ground into the plastic table – there was no life to be had after this.

Tiffany looked about her for a knife, something, anything that she could use to plunge into Christine's heart and save her from Plastic Man's bloody attentions. Nothing.

"Please."

Tiffany closed her eyes and put her hand over Christine's mouth and nose. There was little struggle and soon her peek-a-boo lung was safely nestled in her ribcage – deflated and devoid of oxygen. A spasm of disgust rumbled in Tiffany's stomach and she turned away from the table to retch violently into the corner.

"I hear you!" yelled Plastic Man from the corridor.

"Shit!" Tiffany moved to stand behind the door just as it was flung open. She watched as Plastic Man saw Christine's corpse then walked toward it.

One sidestep and Tiffany was out of the room and running, Plastic Man only a few steps behind her. He had left the end door open, so she tore toward the light, her muddy feet slapping against the plastic floor. Outside she scanned the treeline then bolted into the woods. Night had now enfolded round them, but Tiffany had done many a night shoot and her eyesight adjusted quickly. Acres of woods to play in, he had said. At least she could lose herself in them and finally catch her breath.

As she ran, she heard the crackling of Plastic Man's apron behind her and it made her pump her legs harder. She had always run to keep in shape and now that effort was paying her back in spades. Dipping between the trees, she ran until she lost him. With a deep breath she stopped and looked around; lush trees laden with apples and pears, bushes ripe with blackberries. She reached for an apple and plucked it off the tree. It smelled sweet and she hadn't eaten since last night's dinner.

"Don't!"

Spinning round, Tiffany, weight on the balls of her feet, looked for the owner of the voice.

"Up here," it said.

She looked up into the trees to see a man lying across a thick branch. She moved closer to him and was met by a wafting smell of shit and vomit.

"What the…?" Tiffany put her hand to her nose.

"I'm sorry; I was trying to warn you. The fruit is all poisoned. I ate some and..." His speech was unceremoniously cut short by a dry heave.

"Oh." Tiffany sighed and dropped the apple. "How long have you been up there?"

"Oh, don't know; the pain is unbearable." Another heave and he rocked on the branch.

"Are you an actor too?"

"Singer. Well, I was, anyway. Part of a band." He looked down at her with soft blue eyes that were lined with blood.

"Do you know if there's a way out?"

"No, but you can run. So keep running."

"I can help you," Tiffany said as she hooked her foot over the first part of the tree's trunk.

"I'm dying; you can't help me. You need to run as fast as you can."

"No, I won't leave you up there. Together we can get out, we can..."

“Run!” the man yelled. Tiffany saw a white streak of plastic slipping through the trees toward them.

Her heart pounded in her chest and Tiffany took one more look at the tree man before sprinting off. Behind her she heard the sound of a branch cracking, bodies colliding and then a scream before she smelt fresh blood and shit on the breeze.

As Tiffany ran, nettles slapped at her calves, tearing her nylons and mottling her skin with red blotches. She didn’t feel it. Keeping her eyes firmly on the course she’d chosen to take her through the trees, she powered forward. He was behind her. She could hear the apron crinkling. His breaths were quick and angry. If he had been calm when doing those horrors to Christine, what was he going to do to her? The moon was now big and round and shining a spotlight on Tiffany as she tore through the trees. If she could just make it to a road, she could flag down a car; she’d be safe. In front of her, as if conjured by her needful thought, a break in the treeline appeared. A flash of headlights – the road!

Her lungs burned with exhaustion, but Tiffany put her last drop of adrenalin into a sprint. As she pushed past the trees, she saw the long strip of tarmac busy with traffic.

“It’s going to be okay,” Tiffany breathed. Then she felt the bones in her nose crack as she smacked full speed into a Perspex sheet. Pain slammed into her body and the force of the collision had her reeling back between the trees. A giant, clear, solid plastic fence had been erected in front of the road. Clutching her face, she looked up to see a red snowflake pattern of her blood where she’d collided with it.

“Well, you’ve led me a merry chase,” Plastic Man said as he jogged toward her.

Tiffany’s eyes followed the length of her blood splatter pattern on the plastic fence.

“Oh, it goes on for miles. You can keep running if you like, but you’ll never get out. Just delay the inevitable.”

“Why?” Tiffany curled into a tight ball at the base of a tree.

“Why? Well, the money is good. And I so love the smell of blood.” Plastic Man stood with his hands on his hips.

“Not you,” Tiffany whined. “You’re sick. I saw what you did to Christine. Why would *Jonny* do this to me?”

Plastic Man stepped in front of her and knelt down. “What’s the alternative? You’re old, wrinkly and flabby. What do you suggest? Should we take you to a doctor so he can suck out your fat? Slice your face and pull up the skin to smooth those wrinkles? Oh, I know, use acid to burn away your top layer of skin to reveal new youthful cells beneath?” He laughed and moved to put his face within an inch of Tiffany’s cringing form. “Maybe even make those assets of yours bigger, thrust in a foreign object, cut off your nipples and sew them on higher? Yes – let’s try that.” And with that he head-butted Tiffany, then pulled her unconscious body over his shoulder and started the journey back to the spa to begin his experiments.

About: *Nicky Peacock*

Nicky Peacock is an English author in the UK who writes both YA and adult horror, paranormal romance and urban fantasy. She can be found online doing book reviews, giving writing tips and talking about her work:
http://nickypeacockauthor.wordpress.com

DEMON IN HIS SOUL

By

David Perlmutter

It was a sweltering summer night in 1959 when it happened. The place was Hoppy's Hut, one of dozens of small entertainment venues designed for African American clientele in what was politely known as the "Chitlin' Circuit". The attention of the patrons was entirely focused on the bizarre, wiry personage who was now gracing the stage with his presence. His name was Oedipus Rex, and he was, with some justification, known as the "wild man of rock and soul", for soon to be obvious reasons.

Dressed in a suit of pure white, which served to distract the audience only temporarily from his gesticulations, Oedipus Rex was behaving in a manner that was not customary for the venue. Normally, rhythm and blues singers, his profession, tended to be much more suave and polished, though due to the intensity of much of the material they performed, they did not always maintain this suavity for long. Rex, however, was trying his best to live up to the insanity which his nickname implied he commonly displayed. He had, in fact, begun his performance by emerging out of a coffin, an unusual act to say the least. And as he performed, singing and dancing, he bellowed with the intensity of a demon from the pits of Hell, while shaking a witch doctor's shaman stick and bantering with a preserved human skull he dubbed "Richard", for no particular reason. His frenetic shrieking threatened to destroy the fragile P.A. system, much to the crowd's delight.

"*Baby*," he shouted with deep and troubling intensity as he reached the climax of his trademark song, "*I got a DEMON in my soul*! *And you KNOW you can't resist me now, can ya*?"

Finishing the song, and patently ignoring the frenzied crowd's demands that he perform one of a number of encores he had already done that evening, Oedipus raised his hands for silence, immediately calming the crowd he had only recently worked into a frenzy with his antics.

"I gotta go - down BELOW!" he said as a way of ending his show. "Hope I don't run into any of you *suckers* down in HELL - or you'll be SORRY!"

And with a flash of light that enveloped the stage, he was gone. The patrons were left to scramble out of the establishment in the darkness, marveling out loud at the spectacle they had just seen.

***

Most of the people who attended the performance that evening held the secure belief that Oedipus Rex and his repertoire of bizarre behavior and special effects was a simple “act”. Something that the canny performer was simply using to further his showbusiness career by making himself extremely and dangerously different from the rest of the African American showbusiness community, and something he definitely did not practice or advocate in the more sedate world of “real life”.

They were wrong.

True, Oedipus Rex was a showman like any other, and he was someone who knew the advantages of gaining attention through bizarre means. But his connection to the occult was no act.

What few knew was that Oedipus Rex was, in his off hours, an active and conscientious practitioner of the demonic arts. He understood and was willing to apply any and all of the works of the underworld to get what he wanted. He’d already shown this to three former managers, several theater owners, and numerous women who had attempted to take him off-guard and part him from the substantial amounts of money he jealously hid from the world in a small but tightly locked safe which travelled with him everywhere he went. All of the previously mentioned worthies had made the mistake of trying to cross or anger him - and all had promptly disappeared from the Earth without a trace! This was thanks to the demon who truly *lived in his soul*, and through whose possession he had achieved his fame.

Yet Oedipus would soon find that even demons have limits to their patience.

***

When he was convinced he was alone, with no one to interrupt or bother him, Oedipus took a deep breath and then exhaled a considerable amount of air. This served to expel the demon from Hell who possessed

him, Androchus, one of the Devil's leading henchmen, who had been "lent" to the singer on the condition that he use him only to practice acts of evil upon the populace of America and lure them ever closer to the brink of corruption. But though rock and roll had been repeatedly called "the devil's music" by those who did not understand it and its ramifications in the few years since it had first emerged in the American *zeitgeist*, it was hardly what one would call a handy way of enslaving the masses. Consequently, Androchus had warned Oedipus many times that he needed to ante up his act more if he wanted to retain the services of the people down below, but Oedipus, concerned about maintaining the legitimate end of his career, had steadfastly refused any attempts to make his act more demonic. They were about to undergo another round of this strange debate between the two realms of human existence now.

Androchus, who resembled a ghost with fatter corporeality, stood and faced Oedipus once he had been expelled from his nostrils.

"I suppose you are happy with this routine," he said to Oedipus contemptuously. "Pretending to appeal to the baser instincts of the masses while taking the name of my Master in vain with your showboating!"

"Man, don't say that!" Oedipus countered. "I *said* you'd have a chance to do your thing as soon as I get the right gig! Now ain't the right time!"

"It is *never* the right time with you!" the demon responded. "It wasn't the right time at the Apollo, it wasn't the right time when you were recording those vinyl records at Okeydokey, and it is apparently not the right time, now that your career has suffered an inopportune reversal of fortune, to unleash the forces of Hell upon the Earth! *When will that time EVER come, Oedipus Rex*?"

"Look, man!" Oedipus countered angrily. "It ain't my fault that a brother like me can't get the best gigs in show biz right now! The black man gets his ass handed to him all the time by the white folks that run things, and they always fix it so we can't get the opportunities we need! But just you wait! One of those days Sullivan's gonna find a hole in his schedule for me, and then you can do your thing in front of a national TV audience, dig?"

"But that has not yet happened!" the demon shouted angrily. "My patience, and that of my master, grows thin with you! Night after night I am forced to watch as you use my demonic powers in the services of recreating

your inane recordings in front of a hooting and hollering and condescending audience! I have no idea what this "Porcupine Champagne" you keep singing about is, and I also have no idea what in the world it has to do with my master conquering this realm!"

"Man, don't be insulting my *people*!" Oedipus retorted. "They keep me working solid - so that you at least *have a chance* to expose what you can do in my body every night! Be thankful for that, 'cause it's all you're gettin' right now regardin' exposure! And, as for that "Porcupine Champagne", don't be puttin' it down! It's a *solid* tune! Leiber and Stoller wrote that one *just for me*!"

"Regardless, you have offended my master greatly!" said Androchus as a way of ending the argument. "One of these days, I warn you, he will call on me to extract *vengeance* upon you for profaning his…."

"Oedipus! Open the damn door, man! We gotta talk, quick!"

"Get back inside me, man!" Oedipus ordered the demon. "Nobody can see you outside me, remember?"

"Yes," the demon responded, in a rare show of obedience to the singer. "It was all part of the deal. But remember…"

"I don't forget *nothin*'!" responded Oedipus Rex. "Remember *that*!"

The demon re-entered Oedipus through his nostrils and then the singer marched towards the door of his dressing room and unfastened the deadbolt he had locked when he entered. Standing there, looking angry, was Arbee Feboldson, one of Oedipus' fellow performers, a rhythm and blues singer of some skill, though he was not yet the star Oedipus was - or had once been, to be more precise.

"What you say, Arbee?" Oedipus said. "You upset I upstaged you again, huh? Sorry, man - but you know what kind of show I got!"

"It ain't that, Oedipus!" said Arbee. "The promoter's bailed on us. We ain't gonna get paid if we can't find him!"

"WHAT? How did he get out without none of us seein' him go?"

"I don't know, man! But he got the money, and ain't none of us gettin' our money for the gig if we don't find him!"

"Whup his whitey ass!" Oedipus cursed. "Come on. Let's run out here and find the sum-bitch and then kick him back to Assholeland if he don't produce our money *quick*! We don't work for *free*, y'know?"

"I know that," said Arbee as he watched Oedipus exit the dressing room and lock it. "All us black folks know that! But WHITEY don't know

it!"

"That's why we gotta *make* him know it!" said Oedipus. "Come on! He ain't gotten far yet, has he?"

"Just saw his car go out of the lot," said Arbee.

"Fine," Oedipus said. "Won't be too long now before he gets *his*!"

***

Indeed, as Oedipus suggested, it was not long before the unscrupulous promoter got "his". It was commonplace at this time in the rhythm and blues industry for promoters, black and white alike, to prey on the ignorance of the performers, who, being mostly from the rural South, had little if anything related to business acumen in their genetic makeup. Urban born performers like Oedipus and Arbee were used to these shenanigans, and therefore were able to keep their fellow performers in the loop about such dangers to protect them from same. As a consequence, it was not long before the entire package of performers had surrounded the unfortunate promoter, whose car had gotten stuck in a convenient mud puddle from a recent rainstorm, and proceeded to beat the hell out of him for attempting to abscond with their money. When all had had their turn at attacking the man, Oedipus called upon "his" demonic powers to finish the man off for good, sending a strong shock of electricity through his head with a mere touch that left the man dead on the road. Another touch transformed the dead body into a crispy pile of ashes, leaving absolutely nothing for the police to investigate. This was a security action on Oedipus' part, for, as an African American, he was very much vulnerable to being arrested - or worse - for a mere altercation with a white man in this part of the South.

But it still did not endear him any further to the resident of Hell who dwelt within him. And that resident was, even now, plotting independently against Oedipus inside his own body, readying what he hoped would be a suitable - and ghastly - form of revenge.

***

The revenge came in its final form a few nights later, just after Oedipus took the stage for what would be his final performance. Or, at least, he *tried* to.

The reason this is said needs to be explained, but there is little complexity involved. Oedipus was simply the victim of a practical joke.

On the same bill as Oedipus that evening was a vocal quartet known as the Grifters. These men had had a few hits earlier in the decade, but, like Oedipus himself, their career had hit a downward slide. The decrepit state of their career was best evident by the fact that they spent much of the time they were not performing drinking profusely and consequently making themselves nuisances to the other performers, Oedipus included.

In any event, these gentlemen got it into their heads one evening, just before Oedipus was to go onstage and perform, that it would be absolutely *hilarious* if the old boy couldn't open his coffin just before he made his grand entrance in the swirls of Rosco fog used to introduce him. So, with a little skill and ingenuity, and in the shortest time available, they found Oedipus' trick coffin, wheeled out for its owner's use that evening, and fixed it up so that, rather than being flung open easily to shock the audience, as was the normal case, Oedipus *would be locked inside, unable to escape*!

The Grifters vanished from the scene as soon as Oedipus appeared in his white cape and coat. He got down into the coffin, and two stagehands placed the lid obediently on top of him. With a dramatic flourish, the coffin was wheeled in and brought on stage.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," the P.A. announcement crackled, "here he is for your *spooky* enjoyment, the WILD MAN OF ROCK AND SOUL HIMSELF, OEDIPUS REX!"

This was typically Oedipus' cue to fling the top of the coffin, growl savagely at the audience, and launch himself into performing his first tune with the assistance of the house band. But that did not happen. Indeed, he was unable to open the top of the coffin thanks to the machinations of the Grifters, who were laughing their fool heads off in the aisles.

Oedipus cursed fiercely but inaudibly as he tried and failed to open the coffin lid. He could hear the Grifters laughing, and he positively *knew* those suckers were responsible for humiliating him! As soon as he got out…

However, Androchus was also angered. This was the last of the many humiliations he would suffer at the hands of this ungrateful mortal!

"THIS ENDS NOW," he bellowed to Oedipus. "YOUR DAYS OF ABUSING THE PRIVILEGES OF HELL END NOW, OEDIPUS REX! I

RISE NOW FROM YOUR CONFINEMENT TO WREAK MY VENGEANCE UPON YOUR LAND!"

"No, man!" Oedipus protested weakly. "NO!"

But he could not stop the being from escaping out of his nostrils, nor emerging in his full form in front of the audience. They cheered and applauded, thinking it to be part of the show. But what happened next was definitely *not* part of it….

Androchus escaped out of Oedipus' nostrils and fiercely bellowed in the faces of the patrons of the club. All screamed loudly, especially the women, who were the first to make for the exits. The Grifters, hearing the noise, knew that their efforts to flimflam Oedipus had somehow backfired in spectacular fashion. As the patrons scattered out the doors - and the windows - of the club, and Oedipus tried to free himself from the coffin in vain, Grifters lead singer Clod McPhathead tried to distract Androchus' attention away from Oedipus by making a particularly insinuating comment about the demon's mother. It worked all too well. Within seconds, Androchus had grabbed McPhathead by the leg and thrown him against the wall, shattering him into a bloody pulp. Each of the other four members got their turn being broken by Androchus against the wall. Finally, Androchus was able to turn back to his "master" Oedipus. He shook the coffin violently, making Oedipus scream and swear in protest. At last, he finally grasped the coffin and squeezed it like an accordion. Once again within seconds, what had once been Oedipus Rex had become a pile of broken bones, blood and organs smashed within four pieces of ruined wood.

Then Androchus *really* got started…

***

The truth about that evening at the Fifty Grand Club will never truly be known. All the eye witnesses who survived the initial onslaught of Hell's minions were too scarred by the events to ever tell the whole truth, and all of their accounts contradicted each other when they did attempt such a description. But it can be clearly stated that three things resulted from the final carnage:

The club was completely destroyed.

The land around it, and the few people still remaining in its vicinity, were sucked down below, beneath any civilized area on the face of the

Earth.

And no word nor trace was seen of the demon who once lived in Oedipus Rex's soul - ever again.

About: *David Perlmutter*

David Perlmutter is a freelance writer living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, where he has lived his whole life. His passions are American television animation (the subject of his MA thesis and a projected historical monograph), literature (especially science fiction and fantasy) and music (rhythm& blues, soul, funk and jazz.) This explains why much of his writing is as nonconventional and defiant as it is. He is challenged with Asperger's Syndrome, but considers it an asset more than a disability.

DETACHED

By

Mark Slade

I have something to show you.

You wouldn't believe me if I told you. You always say I'm such a dirty lying bitch. In this case, I'm not. Yes, throughout school, since I was seven, I have lied about a lot of things. No! Not everything -- shut up and listen, will you? Geez. You never let me talk.

Okay. I did lie about my Daddy being an airline pilot. But who cares. That's a job no one wants anymore any way. Just like golfers and schoolteachers. Yes. I did lie about my mother being Anne Coulter. She does get mistaken for her at the mall. Shut up! I swear!

Okay. Get to the story.

I couldn't believe it. It was finally happening. I met Mad Boy. I know you don't believe me. It happened backstage at the last concert in his farewell tour. I was at the concert he did at the old roller rink off of Route 17.

I had been following him for twenty years, since *The Sonic Dead* album. He caught a lot of flak for that record and his persona. Always being compared to Bowie and yeah, maybe some songs on *The Sonic Dead* are a little like Bowie's stuff on the Ziggy Stardust record.

The first time I heard "Pray you're my Prey", I cried. I swear to you, it was like a religious epiphany. I fell to my knees and bawled like a baby. My mom heard me sobbing in my room and threatened to have Max, her new boyfriend, knock down the door. I cried for two hours straight.

When I opened my eyes, I swear I saw Mad Boy standing in front of me, offering me his hand, a huge halo glowing over his head. I knew he was a Godsend.

I swear to you and God. Mad Boy changed my life.

But you see, Bowie was playing a character. Mad Boy is Mad Boy. While Bowie changed character and music every few years, Mad Boy stayed the same.

From what I read, his real name was Alec Grant and he was born in Westshire near London in 1968. He was a loner in school.

And it wasn't until college did he actually have friends. One drunken night he began to sing *Space Oddity*, of all songs, and these friends encouraged him. They formed a four piece called Trash Dance. A proto-punk band with a The Smiths influence bleeding from their sleeves.

A record exec saw them in a London club and only wanted Alec. They created the whole "Dead Rock Singer" persona. The story behind Mad Boy is he was recording his first album and one night he was angry at everyone and stormed out of the studio. He jumped in his car and traveled a winding road on a mountainside. The car swerved and went off into a ravine.

The record company had already spent a pretty penny on Mad Boy, with early promotion and creating an advertising team especially for this project. Someone, not sure who, mentioned they knew a way to bring him back to life. They knew an old gypsy woman who spoke incantations. Mad Boy was brought back to life. Only one stipulation, in order for him to stay alive, he had to keep having hits. And, in return, anyone who bought his records was damned for all eternity. This event, being brought back from the dead, caused him to go insane. Hence the Mad Boy moniker.

For years they kept his real identity and face a secret.

That was the genius of the record company and advertising agency.

But the hits stopped. Mostly due to Mad Boy's refusal to play anything from the old days and not touring, or doing any interviews. The last hit being "Listen to This Damned Song" in 1998.

What?

Oh, get to the point. Fair enough.

He did the concert, and to be truthful, it was a bit embarrassing. I feel sorry for him. Really. He screwed up the lyrics to "Pray you're my Prey" and the guitarist fell off the stage twice. The pyrotechnics was a puff of smoke. I swear to you. During "Listen to This Damn Song" he started dancing and tried to do that backwards spider walk from *The Exorcist* movie and couldn't get up. Two roadies had to help him up.

I swear to you and God, it's true.

When the concert ended, thirty minutes later, I made sure I was going to be noticed by someone to have my chance with Mad Boy.

I was chosen out of fifty people to go backstage to party with Mad Boy. I screamed the loudest for him, even pushed a girl out of the way. He

noticed me. I'm not sure if it was because of my tits or because I was the pushiest out of all the other girls.

He chose me.

Well, firstly, it really wasn't a party. It was just me and him. First thing, he demanded a blow job right off the bat. I was down with that. So I got on my knees, he lowered his sweaty leather pants.

His dick wasn't even hard. I asked him if he wanted me to touch him first to get it erect, and he screamed at me to just do it. Kinda an asshole. He grabbed the back of my head and shoved it in my mouth. I shrugged, start sucking. At first not so bad. I mean it stunk really badly and it tasted like it smelled.

But it got worse.

I was doing what I was known for in high school and not going too fast....

Then he started bucking. But it never got erect. Ever. So I was confused about it. So I had to keep up, y'know? He was bucking harder, moaning....I was sucking faster and faster....

And it came off in my mouth. When he finally noticed, like, thirty seconds later, he screamed and ran off.

There I was, on my knees, with a man's detached penis in my mouth.

I was befuddled until it dawned on me. That story that the record company concocted was true.

You don't believe me?

Here, have a look. See for yourself. It's here, in this box.

About: *Mark Slade*

Mark Slade has appeared in *Blood Moon Rising*, *Hell Whore 2* and *3, Tales Of The Undead-Suffer Eternal 1-3, Diabolic Tales iii,* and *Tortured Souls 1* and *2*. He is host of *Dark Dreams Podcast* and co-editor of *Nightmare Illustrated.*

He lives in Williamsburg, VA with his wife and daughter.

Dressed For Success

By

Mathias Jansson

The voice cut through the applause
Give it back - It belongs to me!
Give back what you have borrowed!
crunched by age and sorrow
the old women backstage
stared at Miss Starly

The sweet heavy smell of lilies in her arms
reminded her of the open grave
and the fatal promise she made
for a life of youth and fame

The young girl chosen to bear
her age and sorrow
so she could live
without worries of tomorrow
was finally here

For a second she had stopped
and thought
that she wanted to freeze and keep
the sweet moment of success
as a star glittering cabaret actress
a thought that broke the secret oath

The applause ceased
as she started to regress
in her red sparkling dress
aging and falling apart
into a lump of bone, meat and dust

The light was fading on the scene
when her star was falling
deep down the depths of hell
where her new master was calling

About: *Mathias Jansson*

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and poet. He has been published in such magazines as The Horror Zine Magazine SNM Horror Magazine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock, The Sirens Call and The Poetry Box. He has also contributed to several anthologies from Horrified Press as Just One More Step, Suffer Eternal anthology Volume 1-3, Hell Whore Anthology Volume 1-3. Homepage: http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se

HOPELESSNESS IS THE NEW HEROIN CHIC

By

Will Millar

I'm going to burn to death.

***

Being psychic doesn't immunize you from life kicking you in the shorts every once in a while. Some people think it's amusing to ask you why you didn't see it coming. It's never funny, though. Not the first time you hear it, not ever.

The same people like to say things like "Working hard, or hardly working?" and, "Not bad for a Monday." It is my fervent hope that scientists may someday locate the chromosome that compels certain individuals to excrete such witticisms, and excise it from the human genome.

Anyway, I should have seen this coming. Not just because of the psychic-ness, but because of what I usually do pick up on.

Bad news. That's all I ever get. It's why I could never run one of those road-side stands you always see in bad neighborhoods, the ones with the flickering neon signs that say "Psychic" or "Tarot" or "Palmistry," whatever the fuck that is. That, and I don't have it in me to bullshit people.

Nobody wants to hear bad news. *Fucking* nobody is going to pay for the privilege, neither. I had a good run for a while though, finding folks that had gone missing. Thing is, by the time I found them, they were dead. Every time.

At some point in the past ten or twelve months, despite my best efforts, what I did started to blip on the local press radar. I don't know how that happened. I never advertised, and only a handful of detectives ever knew about me. You might think that this would be a good thing, but it wasn't. People who disappeared, their relatives wanted them found. They didn't want to wait for the cops. They came straight to me, begging, hysterical.

What could I do? I'd say, "I'll do what I can."

They'd hear: "I promise you that I'll bring them back fine." And I never did.

I found bodies. Sometimes, worse.

I became known as the *Ghoul of Belltown.* I had to move, start over. I even thought about changing my name. But, a change of location was enough. Seattle to Los Angeles - I wanted a polar opposite in my scenery. I didn't realize how much I hated sunshine until a few weeks after the ink dried on the lease.

Clairvoyance makes you a little flaky. That sounds like a cop-out probably, but the truth is that it's hard to maintain a schedule when you don't always perceive time as a linear sequence of events. Also, seeing things that most people don't, means you miss a lot of stuff that seems obvious to others. Point is, I'd been in La-La land for less than a month, and I'd already been fired.

It's not like it was a great job, but I get nervous at interviews. So I'm crossing Figueroa and I don't hear my own name until she's already almost on top of me. She was panting. I don't know how far she'd been chasing me.

"You've always got your head somewhere else, Jay." Leaning over with her hands planted on her knees to catch her breath. She should have let me go.

I mumbled an apology and scanned the traffic for the bus. I was going to need to transfer once to make it to City of Industry. Not having a car in Los Angeles is like not having a kidney. You might be able to survive for a few months, but sooner or later, you're fucked.

"I hardly recognized you, you know. You look ten years younger. You've lost some weight, too."

"Uh, thanks Carrie."

"Did you start working out?"

"No," and for the life of me I don't know why I said what I said next, but it just jumped out of me. "I've had some dreams crushed lately. Maybe that's had a slimming effect."

She laughed. "You're funny, Jay. You've always been funny." She looked me up and down. "You look good, too. Give me your phone."

I did. She smiled a little smile, punched in her number and dialed it. It was buzzing as she handed it back to me.

So was I.

"You'd better call me, funny boy."

I promised I would, soon. As she walked away, there was a little bit of a wiggle in her butt. I always liked her.

***

When things up north started to go south, I did what most non-religious types do. I turned to self-help books. A lot of them recommend affirmations, things like:

"You are destined for success and happiness."

Or:

"You are attracting wealth right now."

Or even,

"That girl two cubicles down is eventually going to realize that you are a complex and fascinating person, and will want to go out with you."

Problem is, like I said earlier, I don't have it in me to bullshit people. Not even myself. I would wake up in the morning and painstakingly write out a list of affirmations, and then I'd look in the mirror. My mirror self would look back with an air of eager hopefulness.

I'd break down.

"Sorry man," I'd say. "It's just not in the cards for you." Because I know, remember? Maybe what I get are only fractured glimpses of possible futures, but for as long as I've lived, I never had a flash of me shopping for boats.

I'm not destined for success and happiness. I'm not attracting anything right now, not wealth, and certainly not the girl two cubicles down at the office I just got fired from.

I don't know why I started doing this, but I did. Anti-affirmations. Every time mirrorself greeted me, it was my goal to break him down a little.

It hurts, but not enough to kill. After a few days, it barely slows you down.

***

The interview was at a call center. Inbound stuff – I don't do telemarketing. I know that's kind of like when a stripper says she's not an

escort, but there's a distinction. The guy running the shop wore a pink polo shirt (LA!) and had enough product in his hair to lube a chassis. I think he spray-tanned, too. He looked like he belonged on the Simpsons. His name was Chad, and he gripped my hand a little too hard when he shook it and smiled like a piranha.

"A guy like you," he said, "I can't have you locked down in a cubicle. I got a few B to B gigs though, you'd be perfect for them. No cold-calling, neither. This is a good deal."

It was, too. The salary alone was almost twice what I'd have been making answering calls, and there were bonuses.

"Why me?" I asked.

"There's just something about you. Charisma. I'm surprised you're not in show-business."

——— ——— ———

I went home and made myself a drink. I've never been the type of guy that women really look twice at. Men neither, although with a pink shirt and a little bit of product, who knows? I slugged down the last of my vodka and padded into the bedroom.

Mirrorself waited; that little glint of wistfulness in his eyes like a well-polished cubic zirconium. I felt like smashing my fist into the glass. "Forget it," I said. "In a few days, they're going to tell you it was a bad fit. They made a mistake, is all. Guys like you don't make headlines. Hell, guys like you barely make it into obituaries. You're useless, Jay. You're going to die broke and alone."

Mirrorself took it in stride, nodding with calm sagacity. I ventured a little closer, and he grew a little bigger. I might not care a lick for LA weather, but it seemed to agree with him. He was tanner, healthier. The *Ghoul of Belltown* had been sleeping better lately.

Mirrorself looked ten years younger.

"Don't worry, Jay. You're probably just going to get skin cancer from all of this sun."

Mirrorself smiled and shook his head. His teeth gleamed like peppermint pearls. I should know better than to try and bullshit anyone by now. Of course he wasn't going to get skin cancer.

I know how I'm going to die. As if to hammer the point home, the mirror shimmered like river water. The room bubbled out, expanding into a

great dining room. Velvet drapes trimmed with gold brocade burst into flames, spewing tentacles of black smoke. A ring of fire strangled the room. Mirrorself's skin ran from his face like wax. His hair lit like a candlewick.

The phone rang.

I shook off the hallucination and answered it. Carrie.

"Are you okay?" she asked me. And: "You sound strange."

I assured her I was.

"Well, I didn't feel like waiting around for you to call, funny boy. So you want to go grab a drink or what?"

I did.

***

"I heard about what happened in Seattle," she said. "I'm sorry."

We sat on an outdoor patio, sharing a pitcher. Pedestrians milled by like pigeons, their paper shopping bags rustling like wings. Sunlight glinted off of passing cars. It was nice.

I shrugged the comment off and sipped my beer. I didn't feel like talking about it.

"So are you really psychic?"

"I am," I said. "But the last thing you ever want is a prediction from me." I told her about the bad news thing and she seemed satisfied. We had another pitcher, and another. She drove me home.

"I like you," she said at the door. We kissed.

It happened as she pulled away. She let go of one of my hands and held onto the other. Her fist burst into flames, eating up her shirt sleeve in seconds. Her head exploded.

I jerked away from her and stumbled down the steps, into the street. A car honked and squealed its brakes and almost ran into another car. Somebody called me an asshole. Carrie ran into the street and pulled me up. I dry-heaved once.

"What is it?" she asked. And: "Is it about me? Is something going to happen?"

Her hand gripped my wrist. It felt like a bare wire had wrapped around my arm. I felt the current of her life coursing through me; strobe-bursts of past, present, and future hammered my skull.

"Please," I gasped. "Let. Me. Go.'

She did. I fell to my knees and retched into the street. She crouched beside me and tried to stroke my hair. I recoiled from her touch.

"Not yet," I said. It took a few minutes for the world to turn back to normal. This wasn't the worst I've ever had, but it cracked the top ten.

When I have a flash like that, it's like getting a massive dose of sodium pentothal mixed with a high grade amphetamine. Not only can I not prevent myself from telling the truth, I can't shut up, either. So, I lay on my side curled up into a fetal ball and I babbled at her.

"You have a sister. You've always been afraid she was better looking than you, and you hate her for it. Your fiancé in college use to think about her when he was fucking you. She sucked his dick once at a wedding while they were both drunk. You stayed with him for a year after you found out anyway, because you were scared of being alone."

That's as far as I got. She stood up and shrieked at me that she hated me, and to never call her again, and some other stuff I only half heard. I think she kicked me. By the time I was able to stand up, she was gone.

***

She called me the next day, telling me she had to see me. We arranged a meeting at an espresso stand and I got there fifteen minutes early. I was so nervous that I wrote out an apology on an index card. It was slowly turning into mush in my fist by the time she arrived. I never got a chance to read it to her.

I barely recognized her. Overnight she'd lost a few pounds. Her hair was fuller, shinier. Whereas on our date the night before her hair was a listless dirty blond, it was now a glossy platinum color.

I felt a lead weight in my gut as voices echoed in my mind: *You look ten years younger… There's something about you, I'm surprised you're not in show business…*

"It's you," she said. "You did this."

——— ——— ———

I first met Carrie in the U-District, up in Seattle. She was getting a degree in marketing while I was busy flunking out. She'd moved to California after graduating and started working as a television producer. It

was her idea. I don't even know why I went along, although I'd be lying if I said the idea didn't appeal to me on a lot of levels.

My first new client was a weathergirl from News Channel 16, who'd gone about two years past her LA prime, which meant that in any other city she'd be a solid ten. If you looked at her with a big enough magnifying glass, you'd see some crow's feet, though.

You'd have thought somebody threw acid in her face, the way she was carrying on about them.

Carrie set up a little office for me in her guest house. Two padded chairs, round table with a simple white cloth over it, candles. I told her the candles were a bit much. She replied "Showbusiness," and that was it.

Weathergirl showed up on time for her appointment. It was just after sunset. We sat across from each other and linked hands.

"Your son Gary is in college," I told her. "He likes to get girls so drunk that they can't say no to him. In three months, one of them is going to wake up in the middle of it and fight back. Gary is going to punch her so hard that he fractures her skull, and she's going to walk with a limp for the rest of her life."

A few weeks later, Weathergirl's contract was renewed with an add-on bonus of fifty thousand dollars a year. She was also named "Milf of the Month," in Maxim magazine.

I was in business. Actors, musicians, reality show personas, they all wanted a reading. Somebody on the internet called it "Psychic Botox." I guess that was as good a name for the phenomena as anything. I filled their heads full of poison and they'd get back a decade or two.

It was non-invasive. It was the most invasive thing in the world. More importantly, it worked. Former A-Listers who hadn't seen the red carpet since Bush Sr. was in office were making startling comebacks. An entire squadron of muscle-bound 80s action stars celebrated their dip in the fountain of youth by doing an ensemble cast summer blockbuster.

I moved into Carrie's house, into her bed. "Tell me how I'm going to die," she asked one night.

"You're going to have a horrible accident," I said.

"Will it hurt?" she asked.

"More than you can possibly imagine. But it will be over quickly."

***

Sometimes I forget that I don't know everything.

I'm seated across from this guy you know. He went from being nominated for an Oscar, to spoofing his own movies, to playing himself on a sit-com, which he was fired from. He now has his own reality show. About a year ago, he got married and found Jesus. A few months later, his new wife was pregnant. The celebrity dish-mags went nuts about the whole thing.

At his reading, I told him it wasn't going to last. About 6 months into the pregnancy he was going to get caught with a hooker, by paying her with a credit card.

A week after seeing me, he landed a straight-to-DVD release that did pretty well. He started getting work again. That was ninety days ago.

He's telling me that I saved his life. That when I told him his fortune, he was already considering stepping out on the ball and chain, and it was a much needed wakeup call. She carried his pup to term without a single trip to the massage parlors.

"That can't be true," I say. "You just haven't gotten caught yet."

"Check again," he says, offering me his hands.

Aside from a fatal lung disease waiting for him just around the corner, he's clean.

"You saved my life," he says again.

For once, I keep my mouth shut. No sense in ruining the guy's day.

***

I had to take a walk. *Why him?* I thought. But, maybe it wasn't just him. After all, this new thing I could do hadn't manifested itself until I'd moved to LA – who was to say it wasn't changing further?

I stopped. If I could change the course of people's future, then maybe Carrie didn't have to burn with me. But the only way to make sure was to get as far away from her, as quickly as possible. I was going to have to leave LA.

I gave her everything we'd made together; the house, the cars, every cent in the accounts. It was only fair. It had been her idea in the first place, and I loved her. I left her a note and took a few changes of clothes and enough money for a bus ticket and some food for a few days.

The lady at the Greyhound terminal told me that the next bus to NY wasn't going to leave until tomorrow. My cell phone started buzzing. Carrie left a voicemail. I never listened to it.

I made one more phone call on that cell before I threw it in the trash. I figured the guy owed me a favor. I saved his life, after all. He agreed to pick me up from the terminal, and was happy to drop me off in the morning. Hell, he would have flown me across the country himself, but I said no thanks. I didn't want to leave a trail.

He said his beach-house would be the perfect place to hide out for the night, and I believed him. As we pulled into the long driveway up, I saw about a half dozen town cars, and I asked him about it.

He offered me a sheepish grin. "A few people wanted to say goodbye."

My heart galloped. "Carrie?" I asked.

He laughed. "No worries, man. We know how to be discreet."

He walked me into the foyer. They were all waiting for me - every one I'd "helped" wanted to see me off. There was champagne and applause and a banner that said *Good Luck Jay!*

People clapped me on the back and shook my hand and wept. They told me they were going to miss me. Somebody complained that it smelled like gas. I knew as soon as the French doors swung open to the enormous dining hall.

Carrie had simply walked up the beach. The big bay windows hung open, heavy velvet drapes billowing in the breeze. She stood just outside, holding the Molotov like the Statue of Liberty. She cried and asked me, *How could I?*

The bottle burst in her hand and flames consumed her like a swarm of ants. She pitched forward, headfirst into the house. Fire tore across the hardwood floor. I looked at all of my newfound friends and they were all so beautiful.

They were going to be legends.

About: *Will Millar*

Will Millar is the author of the novel Infernal Machines, as well as several other short Horror stories in various anthologies. He is also a

regular contributor to the humor site Cracked.com. He lives in Arizona, where he works on finishing his 2nd book whenever he isn't busy shooting his mouth off on Twitter.

KISSING OFF AMBER

By

Ken Goldman

Blessed with the brooding good looks of a matinee idol and a modicum of talent, rising star Zane St. George allowed no nubile young thing to stand in the way of his destiny. Love never entered into the equation. There were those women who would claim St. George had no idea what the word meant.

“I'm so sorry it has to be this way. It's been great, really great [add name here], but you see...”

He could do this with Amber O’Hara too. Hell yes, he could do this. Like any method actor worth his union card he made himself believe it.

He was an actor, dammit.

All he had to do was stick to the script...

Zane pulled the covers from him while Amber lay at his side. She was a light sleeper and she yawned herself awake. The digital read 4:48.

“Sorry,” he said, already half out of bed and sweating despite the room’s coolness. “I didn’t mean to--”

“Got to pee again?” she asked, her words muffled by the pillow.

“No. Got to talk. I mean, now that you’re up.” He switched the light on. Amber turned to him, beautiful even without her makeup. Her hair looked like spilled butterscotch, not a bad catch for a kid who was hacking cabs in L.A. less than a year earlier. He was going to hate this.

[Fuck it. Got to stay focused, like McCaffee says.]

“Christ, Zane, last night was wonderful. But it's almost morning and yesterday I could hardly walk. Put that thing back in your ’jammies.”

“No. I mean I really want to talk.” His words sounded serious enough to bring the girl’s smile to a full stop. “It’s been a great few months. I wanted you to know that. There’s no other way to say this, Amber. There’s the new pilot, you know, and I have a real shot this time. Maybe you and I ought to slow it down while the networks are looking it over. To keep me focused, I mean. I didn’t want to hurt you, but --”

That much was true. Zane had already completed the pilot for “The World According to Sam,” some Harry Potter rip-off about a 20-something kid who discovers, with full laugh-track accompaniment, that he’s a wizard. St. George personally thought the script was a piece of shit, an obvious Frodo-Meets-Seinfeld stew, but if the new comedic fantasy series deal came through he had performed his last dancing Dr. Pepper commercial. He didn’t need to hear his agent lecturing about the necessity of keeping his female fans’ panties moist, or how he could never allow any young coozepot to derail him from the fast track. But Max McCaffee, always laboring for his ten per cent, had preached anyway about the importance of remaining unencumbered and focused on the prize. St. George didn't expect Amber to understand any of this, but the model’s understanding was never a requirement.

“Wait. Hold on here --” Amber interrupted, allowing Zane's words to sink in. She sat up. “Let me get this straight. I’m here in your bed with your cum drying on my thighs and you’re telling me goodbye? What is this, a joke?”

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? It’s just that--”

She turned from him. “No, I’m sorry. Because I’m not going to let it happen, Zane. Not tonight. I’m going back to sleep.” She fell into her pillow, pulling the covers to her chin.

Zane wasn't certain he had understood the girl correctly. “Amber, did you hear what I--?” Nothing. “Look, you can’t just pretend you didn’t hear me.”

Apparently she could. Except for a cute snort the girl was already gone, sleeping as if she had flat-lined. Maybe she was just playing dumb, dismissing what he had told her as if his words had resulted from some bad fish. But a vindictive former lover was no laughing matter for a guy with so much to lose. Zane did not intend his first shot at stardom to be his last.

He remained awake until the alarm sounded. At 6:30 Billy Joel was saying goodbye to Hollywood.

Amber had already commandeered the small kitchen and fixed Zane a cheese omelet with bacon just the way he liked it, even smiled when she placed a cup of steaming coffee before him. She said nothing of the night before. He kept quiet too, conscientiously burying himself behind the new *Enquirer*, acting absorbed in an article about Britney Spears’ fading career. Possibly Amber believed she had dreamed their conversation of the

previous night, deciding to keep any negative energy from disturbing her concentration. She was modeling for some weenie bop magazine later in the morning and maybe needed to keep her spirits up for the shoot. Denial worked a whole lot better than Valium.

"Sleep well?" he finally asked as if their late night conversation never happened.

Amber giggled like he had made a joke. "Weren't you there?"

He smiled unconvincingly and focused on his eggs. He wasn't that skilled an actor to pull off good spirits this morning. After ten silent minutes she kissed his forehead. "Give that peacock network hell today." She headed for the door carrying her overnight bag. "Call me tonight." She blew him another kiss.

Zane smiled and waited for her to fire up her Mustang, certain he wouldn't be making that call. Instead he called McCaffee. He didn't apologize for waking him.

"Max, I think I may need your help ..."

***

At the Green Garden Max McCaffee listened over his second plate of fried eggs, rubbed a thick hand over his bald pate, and gave his client the expected lecture about the disadvantages of thinking with his penis. "So this Amber is going to be a problem?"

"I'm pretty sure she won't go quietly into the night and I don't have the stomach for a round of damage control after the fact. Christ, Max. You know what to do. You're the wizard of Oz, so just fucking do it!"

McCaffee had been through this before with his young and horny male clients who quickly discovered that in the parallel universe of Hollywood, women were a different breed. He didn't need some vindictive cunt running to the Tattler three episodes into "The World According to Sam" with some story about how St. George couldn't get it up for anyone without a dick. He pulled out a small black velvet box and handed it to Zane. "Your love-life is going to break me, kid." The disappointment showed on Zane's face. McCaffee's connections were shady but they were also legion in this town. The man could make things happen, and that included arranging for selected persons to go away. St. George expected a lot more from him than a string of pearls that looked like decayed teeth.

“Jesus, Max, you think Amber’s so dumb she can be bought off with a goddamn piece of costume jewelry the fucking oyster was glad to get rid of? She’s a model, not a nitwit!” He shoved the junk stones back into their container. “You’re going to have to do a whole lot better.”

“Not on my salary. Trust me, these pearls are special in ways you can’t imagine. You’ll see. Hang these babies ’round her neck and that fashion plate will think you’re one class act, kiss you tenderly, and wish you luck with your career. By next week you’ll be home free while she’s screwing some new guy whose ass is squeezed into Calvin Klein briefs on a Ventura billboard.”

McCaffee knew how to put things into perspective. A second inspection of the pearls suggested that maybe, if Zane kept the lights low enough, the necklace ploy might work. Of course, it was even money Amber would tell him to take a flying leap at a donut and flush the stones down the toilet.

Max seemed certain enough to reassure him. There was no pitch man in Burbank like McCaffee, and Zane hoped some of the man’s talent had rubbed off on him. The agent scarfed down the last of his eggs with a smile. “I’ll handle your bitch kitty myself if you’re not satisfied with the results. I have a lot invested in you, kid, just for the record. Now, let’s get your ass over to NBC and make you famous ...”

***

[-- From the pilot script of “The World According to Sam” (pg. 23)]

... and cautiously, Sam enters the cave of Old Grindolph the wise man, whose face is hidden in smoke and darkness. The elder sits in the far corner cross-legged smoking his holy pipe. He has been expecting this young prodigy but reacts with barely a notice, knowing much more than he will be telling. Sam approaches slowly, standing before the aged master without a word, uneasy and fidgeting in the dancing candle light.

OLD GRINDOLPH: “So, we seek a wizard and a wizard is what ye claim to be, lad? Most curious, a wizard th’t calls himself Sam, no less. Come ...”

SAM (steps forward): “I seek Grindolph the elder, whose wisdom might reveal the truth of who I am. He is whom I seek. You are him ... that is, you're he. I mean ... You're the guy!” Shrouded in thickening curls of smoke the old man demonstrates the first evidence of curiosity regarding his strange visitor.

OLD GRINDOLPH: “The nearest mountain tram does not travel to this height. There exists no means by which one so inexperienced might complete this treacherous journey alone, yet here ye be. Tell me, young Sam, is it wizardry helps ye climb this remote mountaintop?”

SAM: “Only the wizardry required to follow a map. I hitched a ride on a local donkey leased from some old woman on her way from market. Let me tell you, that trip was murder on the poor ass. And it wasn't much fun for the donkey either.”

[Sam, coughing, swaps at the air to clear the smoke screen surrounding the old man]

SAM: “You ought to break the habit, man. That stuff will kill you.”

The elder looks at him with no change in his expression or in his smoking.

OLD GRINDOLPH: “I should think your concern would lie with your own wellbeing, young Sam, for my destiny is not as yours. If ye be a seeker of truth, then a true wizard must first learn to separate what ‘seems’ from what ‘is’.”

Something suddenly diverts Sam's attention. Old Grindolph's beautiful young granddaughter, Trista, appears as if from nowhere. She notices Sam staring with interest and shyly averts her eyes.

Sam, clearly forgetting the purpose of his mission, mutters to himself “I’ll show you ‘what is’ old man.” He keeps right on staring at the young girl. Finally he turns to Old Grindolph.

SAM (whispers): “Psst! Old guy! You got a breath mint?”

***

McCaffee earned his paycheck later that morning. “The World According to Sam” was typical sitcom tripe but the NBC brass loved the tape, even were interested in a call-back within the week because those money grubbers over at “Friends” were finally into their last season. The four studio suits seemed especially taken with Zane's performance in the lead, the sole woman among them suggesting the actor had a smart ass quality with a dark edge, “like the bastard son of Michael J. Fox and Leona Helmsly.” One guy seated at the far end of the long table even gave the young hopeful the eye. St. George figured if that’s what it takes to land the series he might even let Mr. Big believe he had a chance at packing some fudge. He smiled right back at him.

Smiling handshakes were exchanged all around, the equivalent of a verbal contract in Studio City.

Later, he and Max shared a liquid lunch on Glenoaks Boulevard and clinked their martini glasses with high hopes. McCaffee reminded him the day's success made the necessity of Amber's graceful exit even more urgent. St. George tapped the necklace inside his sportscoat to assure him the deed was as good as done.

Zane made the call he swore he wouldn't make, performing the best of his acting repertoire in his conversation. The TV pilot looked like it was a ‘go’, he told Amber; she told him his success required a celebration, suggesting a candle-lit dinner at her place. He offered to pick up a bottle of cabernet; she offered him the best oral sex in Santa Monica.

Zane revealed nothing of his intentions. Hell, he wasn’t ending it with her completely, not really. He saw no reason they couldn’t get together now and then, that’s how he would explain it to Amber, although it seemed prudent to tell that to her after the blow job.

He had never been to her place, but it was as he imagined it, a tasteful garden apartment along the trendier section of Wilshire with windows everywhere so sunlight washed each room during any time of day. The lush couch was framed with swivel glass accent tables and the living room low-lit with Fuente floor lamps. One wall remained completely blank, lacking any pictures, plants, or cumbersome book shelves. Definitely L.A. minimalist chic. There were mirrors everywhere, of course. Models rarely strayed far from their own reflection.

They ate a fantastically cooked duck l'orange. They drank some very good wine. And they fucked right there on her luxuriously upholstered couch. Twice.

Amber was slipping into her jeans when Zane approached behind her and handed her the black velvet box, thankful for the dim lighting. "I wanted you to have this," he said. He considered kissing her, but she could have easily misinterpreted that. He felt vaguely idiotic just standing there.

Amber grinned, clearly surprised but pleased.

"What's the occasion?"

Well, babe, the occasion is I'm going to be tipping my hat for a while, even though ten minutes ago you were taking it from me in the ass...

"I saw it and thought you should have it." Simple. Clean.

Amber looked inside and her expression changed that instant. For one horrible moment Zane feared she might turn to him and deliver a haymaker right across his chops. Instead her lip quivered as if she were about to burst into tears.

"Zane, you shouldn't have done this. These must have cost a fortune. Where did you find something so beauti--?" And then she did cry.

St. George never could deal properly with a sobbing woman, but at least for now her tears were happy ones. Her reaction touched something inside him, something unfamiliar and mildly disquieting. He didn't have the heart to go through with the rest of his planned speech, not feeling like this.

"Aren't you going to try them on?" he asked instead, dispensing with his carefully planned kiss-off. He had to hand it to Max. Somehow those pearls now looked like a million bucks, nothing like the uncomely boogers he had seen inside the Green Garden. A neat trick, but entirely up to snuff for Maxwell McCaffee. Before a mirror, he helped slide the jewelry around Amber's delicate neck, and with a face glistening with tears she looked at his reflection behind her.

"They're beautiful," she said.

"And so are you."

She turned to him.

Amber was a goddamned knock-out even wearing simple jeans and a bra and with her makeup smeared. The pearls added something, some indefinable quality Zane hadn't seen before. He had no idea what that quality was, but his heart felt like a runaway train. Screw Max McCaffee and his red flags. He was going to kiss her, and he was going to do it right

now, kiss her hard and kiss her long, because this girl was something special. This girl was...

... She was gagging??

She was trying to scream! “What the -?”

Amber, choking for air, gasped while the necklace tightened like a coiled snake around her throat, twisting itself with elongated canine incisors until her tendons darkened like thick veins. The string of teeth drew blood, chewing into the soft flesh of her neck.

“I can't breathe! I can't--!”

He tried to unhook the necklace but the catch had welded shut. Tugging at it made it worse.

“Uuuurg--gghhh!!”

“Shit! Shit!!”

Amber's face went pale, her eyes flickering wildly like something inside had shorted out. A thick stream of spittle drooled from her mouth.

[Trust me, these pearls are special in ways you can’t imagine.]

Max! Damn him!! The prick must have known all along.

Amber fell limp in Zane’s arms.

“I'll kill the bastard! I'll cut his fucking throat!! I'll cut his - -”

“--CUT!!”

Amber shoved Zane from her with a sudden fury, putting as much distance between them as she could. A heavy-set woman appeared from nowhere and rushed to hand the girl a glass of water. Amber gulped a good deal of it down, then spun back towards St. George spitting her words at him so that only he could hear.

“What kind of gorilla are you? You practically broke my neck in that scene, asshole!”

The empty wall Zane had noticed earlier no longer was there. Instead, he saw an entire crew of people, a technical staff of dozens, milling about behind the array of behemoth television cameras with the NBC logo. The floor was littered with the familiar studio cable rigging from assorted sound boards and mixers.

“That was great, Amber, just great,” a male voice called from behind one of the cameras, but Zane could not make out a face. “I really believed that struggling. Sam, you were a little wooden. I need more anger during that scramble to remove the necklace, okay? We’ll go one more time.”

Zane watched the girl storm off while he squinted at what appeared before him. He could determine some shapes but nothing distinct or familiar.

“Who are you people? What's going on here?”

No one answered, but activity continued all around Amber. The heavy set woman approached him with a swab of powder. He swatted her away.

“Spray those goddamned mirrors, Eddie!” another voice called out. “We’re getting too much glare from Camera Three!”

“Listen, I don't know what the fuck is happening!!”

A large figure stepped from behind one of the cameras, thick beads of sweat dotting his bald head.

“Max! What are you doing here? Jesus, Max, will somebody please tell me what--?”

McCaffee put an arm around Zane. “Relax, kid, okay? You're making an ugly scene. Calm down before you blow it.” He handed Zane a folder. Tugging some pages from it, St. George read.

Blessed with the brooding good looks of a matinee idol and a modicum of talent, rising star Zane St. George allowed no nubile young thing to stand in the way of his destiny. Love never entered into the equation.

He flipped through the pages to a brief scene in bed with Amber. Again to another scene over breakfast with his agent. Later the scene with the necklace.

“Max, this is a script?”

Max pulled him aside as if sharing a secret. “Of course it’s a script. A manufactured television prime time soaper churned out by a half dozen paid monkeys, like a thousand other horse shit television scripts! What else would it be? Christ, Sam, get it together and stick to the dialogue that’s written, will you? This is the third time this week you’ve pulled this shit. They’re already talking about replacing you with Matt LeBlanc.”

“Why is everyone calling me Sam? Sam is the character I’m playing for the pilot! I’m Zane! Zane St. George! You’ve known me for a year!”

Max turned toward the fourth wall to address the camera crew. “Listen, guys. Can we take a few minutes here. Sam’s a little confused. Just five minutes, okay?” He returned his attention to his client, speaking low

and managing to keep a lid on his anger. “Listen to me and try to take this in, kid. Zane St. George is the character you’re playing in ‘Amber’s World.’ Got that straight, Sam? Amber O’Hara’s show, her series, her ball game. Not yours. She calls the shots here. Now cut this shit out and let’s get back to work.”

“But you were with me, Max! You were there just this morning. You gave me that necklace. We had drinks! Don’t you remember? Jesus, has everyone here gone fucking crazy?”

A voice called from behind the cameras. “Time is money, McCaffee! Tempus Fugit! Is your boy ready to go, or what?”

“One minute, Aaron, okay? Just one minute.”

“I'm counting, McCaffee. Joey Lawrence is a phone call away. What’s it going to be, kid? Ten ... Nine ...”

“Sam, please ... just get back to the script, okay?”

“I'm not Sam! Max, I swear to God I don’t know what the hell is going on!”

“Six ... Five ...”

Amber returned to her mark and she wasn't smiling. “Joey Lawrence, asshole. One phone call. Just wait and see. You’ll be forgotten by next week!”

“Stick to the script, Sam. I’m begging you, kid ...”

“Max, I'm telling you, I don’t --”

“...Two ... One ...”

***

“ ... ACTION!”

Sam approached the old man slowly, standing before him without a word, uneasy and fidgeting in the dancing candle light. Knowing much more than he would be telling, Old Grindolph blew smoke curls from his pipe even as he spoke.

“So, we seek a wizard and a wizard is what ye claim to be, lad? Most curious, a wizard th’t calls himself Sam, no less. Come ...”

The old man delivered the lines expertly with a crispness that would have made anyone believe the guy really was a wizard himself. That was the cruel irony of Zane St. George’s career. Following years of unemployment checks here he was in the role of a lifetime as the wise elder,

Grindolph, and he was too much of an old fart to reap the real rewards of his craft. Christ, was there anything as pathetic as a forgotten elderly actor?

The new kid delivered his lines.

"I seek Grindolph, the wise one whose wisdom might reveal the truth of who I am."

Here the aged Grindolph's attention was supposed to focus on this handsome upstart playing Sam, the character who apparently had wizardly powers of his own. But instead St. George couldn't take his eyes from the fresh and adorable actress in the role of his beautiful young granddaughter. She was dressed in flowing silk and her breasts peeked right through the sheer material like ripened pomegranates. He wondered if she liked the pearl necklace he had left inside her dressing room with the unsigned note: "I saw it and I thought you should have it."

The stones were a little seedier than St. George would have preferred, but it was all he could afford. In the script the girl's name was Trista, and she was the loveliest creature he had ever seen. Zane knew how unseemly it was to gawk at her like this, that somehow he would have to turn off this ridiculous and foolish adulation. Christ, in "The World According to Sam" he was supposed to be the girl's grandfather!

He could do it. He could forget this nonsense and be the actor he knew he was. Just not today, not right now, not while all these heated emotions stirred. A short while ago he had felt certain those long lost feelings had died, and that made them mean so much more to him now.

No fool like an old fool, wasn't that how the saying went? Well, then, he would be a fool, the biggest fool that ever was.

Because from the moment Zane St. George first saw that magnificent young girl, the venerable performer could think of nothing else but the budding television actress Amber O'Hara.

About: *Ken Goldman*

Ken Goldman is a former English/Film Studies teacher and an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. He has homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore. His stories appear in over 670 independent press publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Australia with over thirty due for publication in

2013-14. Since 1993 his tales have received seven honorable mentions in The Year’s Best Fantasy & Horror. He has written four books, three short story anthologies: YOU HAD ME AT ARRGH!! (Sam's Dot Publishers), DONNY DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE (A/A Publishing) and STAR-CROSSED (an e-book by Vampires 2 Publishers); and a novella, DESIREE (Damnation Books). Ken isn't famous yet; he plans to achieve his fame posthumously.

LET THEM EAT CAKE

By

Rob Smales

Becca tried to stay as still as possible as the box shook and swayed slightly. She braced her hands on the floor to either side, crouching on one knee in the dark as she was rolled out.

I hope they get this show on the road, before I get too stiff to move.

It had been a long time since she'd done this particular schtick. No one asked for it anymore, and she had been surprised when they inquired about it, but it all sort of made sense when they mentioned it was his one hundredth birthday. Nostalgic. An old-fashioned surprise. It all made sense, but a hundred?

Jesus.

Becca crouched silently inside the huge cake, hoping to God she wasn't about to give some *very* old man a heart attack.

She could feel them wheeling the cake into position, hear the muffled party sounds penetrating the layers of icing, cake and cardboard. She wasn't sure how large the party was, having been snuck in through the back after the festivities had already begun and kept out of sight as she got right in the cake so as not to spoil the surprise. It didn't sound like a huge crowd. She was waiting for them to start — there it was.

The song.

...happy birthday to you... happy birthday to you...

She sang along to herself, silently, keeping track of the words, readying herself, knowing that when the song was over they'd give the signal…

The song ended, and the whole crowd roared "Happy birthday!"

The signal.

Becca leaped up, swinging her arms up to lead with her hands, bursting through the cake and sending the top layer flying. She'd probably wind up smearing some icing on herself during the show, but she *really* didn't want that stuff in her hair. She came out of the cake to the waist, breasts bouncing as she scanned the room for the birthday boy. Her nipples

hardened in the sudden cool of the room, a contrast to the stuffy warmth of her own body heat trapped inside the cake with her.

Good, she thought. *Maybe it'll make me look interested, get me a better tip. Where the hell is the old guy?*

She looked around for a few seconds, surveying the small crowd for an ancient face, yet she saw nothing but about two dozen twentysomethings smiling hungrily up at her. The group went silent as she stood there craning her neck at them, and the silence made her feel self-conscious. Her voice was a little too loud in the sudden stillness.

"Where's the birthday boy?"

Between herself and the silent onlookers stood a man, dark-eyed, raven-haired and handsome, who slowly raised one hand. Becca stared at him, a man surely no older than herself, and tried to modulate her voice, the utter quiet of the men in the room unnerving her more than a little.

"But, I thought this was a one hundredth birthday party…" she began, but trailed off as he captured her gaze with his dark eyes. Keeping them fixed on hers he reached out and swung a chair from a nearby table over to the edge of the cake platform, extending the other hand toward her. She took the proffered hand and he helped her out of her confectionery prison.

"It's a misunderstanding," he said, once she was on safer footing. His voice was soft but deep, a fair match for those eyes of his; eyes which seemed larger up close, soft black pools from which she could not tear her gaze, strangely dominating her attention until she had a hard time thinking of anything else. A small part of her was still aware that she was standing before the crowd of silent observers clad in nothing but a thong and a little frosting that clung to one knee, but the greater part of her wanted to simply stare into those eyes and wait for him to speak again, longing for his words, his attention.

He did speak again, the sound of his voice causing her to feel a heat that had nothing to do with the room.

"My birthday was last month, actually. I was one hundred and twenty three."

He smiled, and she thrilled at the thought that his smile was for her and her alone, though that small part of her mind that had not been captured by his gaze, that still felt like *Becca*, registered that his mouth seemed to contain far too many strong, white teeth. The small bit of self she had left

raged and fought to take control but could find no purchase on the rest of her mind; it was like trying to hold back a waterfall with her bare hands.

"Tonight," he went on, his voice caressing her like silk, drawing still more internal heat, "tonight we celebrate not the day of my birth, but the day of my death. It's my 'rebirth-day', as it were. My friends here," - he gestured to the silently staring assemblage - "took me to dinner, and now it is time for dessert."

As her sense of self fought, the rest of Becca felt a slow, relaxed sorrow at his words, and she gestured vaguely at the mess behind her.

"I'm sorry, I think I destroyed your cake."

She felt his hand at the side of her face, caressing her cheek as those eyes drew closer, felt his breath upon her skin.

"That is alright, sweet girl. I do not eat… cake."

The strange duality of feeling inside her, the intense battle between the inner Becca and the outer, meant even she could not tell if her tears were of joy or sorrow as his teeth found her throat.

About: *Rob Smales*

Rob Smales' short story credits include pieces in Dark Moon Digest, Bewildering Stories E-Zine, Dark Moon Publishing's Frightmares: A Fistful of Flash Fiction Horror, and more recently the anthologies The Ghost IS The Machine from Post Mortem Press and Dangers Untold from The Horror Society. His first story collection, The Dead of Winter, is scheduled to be available in November 2013, from Hazardous Press.

He is currently an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writer's Association in good standing.

NIGHT OF THE HIDDEN WAG

By

Shaun Avery

Five minutes to midnight, outside of the open door to a hotel room, two women looking in.

The place looks like an abattoir.

'Oh my,' Miss Wilson says. 'I can see why you called me.'

'I had to,' Shontelle says, panic and terror still scrunching up the work of surgical art that is her face. 'I didn't know what to do.'

'Yes.' Miss Wilson peers at the bloody mess through a thick pair of glasses. 'Is that orange paint?'

'No, Miss Wilson,' Shontelle tells her, looking rather sheepish. 'That's his skin.' She takes a closer look, struggles not to vomit at the sight and the smell. 'What's left of it, anyway.'

'Oh yes,' Miss Wilson says, nodding. 'He did love to keep a good tan, didn't he?'

'He loved his tattoos, too,' Shontelle adds. 'He got the name of everyone in his team inked on him.' She remembers something she'd read in a training session not so long ago. 'Though he got a few removed when it turned out he was sleeping with their wives.'

'Yes,' Miss Wilson says, and there is a note of admiration in her voice that brings a brief smile back to Shontelle's face. 'You certainly picked well.'

'I know,' Shontelle replies. 'But I think I got carried away.'

Miss Wilson spins her head around, fixes the younger girl with a glare. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Sorry,' Shontelle says. 'I meant, I fink I got a little carried away.'

'That's more like it, my dear,' Miss Wilson says. 'We taught you better than that at WAG School.'

About: *Shaun Avery*

Shaun Avery is a crime and horror fiction fan who has won competitions with his work, and has stories upcoming in many anthologies and magazines. He has a particular fondness for writing tales that mock people's obsession with fame and TV. He does not have a favourite footballer's wife.

PREY FOR THE DEVIL

By

H. I. M. Hortenzia I Moscato

I awoke with my head pounding, feeling dead at 3:33 in the afternoon. It was a little early for my usual routine, which is closer to four or five since I don't get into bed much before four in the morning on most nights. Work, work, work is all I do, but when you love your job it's never really work – just endless hours of play. Idle hands are the devil's workshop, they say. I couldn't help but laugh at the thought of the old cliché. Now if I could just make all this work pay off a little better, I'd be doing well. I lay in my king-size bed staring at the cracking stucco ceiling of my current shit-hole apartment and wondered who the two barely legal looking naked chicks were who lay on either side of me. I reached over the sweaty, knotted-haired blonde to the nightstand for what was left in the Crown Royal bottle, took a swig and swished it around over my tongue for a moment to wash the taste of salty bitch from my mouth, before gulping it down. The redhead on the other side stirred. "What the hell, Luis! Isn't a little early in the day even for a rock star to be putting on the Crown?" she said sarcastically.

"Not quite a full-on rock star yet, beautiful," I answered since I had no fucking idea what her name was. "Heavy is the head that wears the crown, you know." I laughed. The redhead was so damn young that she smiled wide at me and got excited as if she had never heard the phrase before.

"That's beautiful. You should definitely make that into a song."

Suddenly feeling disgustingly old for twenty-four, I crawled my naked ass over her to get off the bed and headed to the bathroom to take a leak. The skin on either side of my dick was rubbed raw and it felt as if I had put it into a meat grinder. The state of my genitals made me wish I could have remembered the sex I'd had last night, since it must have been good for me to be this sore - ah, there's always later. The thought made me chuckle a bit. The resiliency of the human body always amazed me and as chewed up as my poor pecker was, the notion of climbing back into bed and

starting over with the girls pressed on my brain. But I knew that would have to wait until later since there were other evil deeds yet to accomplish.

Today, at 5:30 pm, I had an appointment with Sonny Cardigan himself, at Cherubim Records. He was not only the CEO of the label, but the biggest music producer on the East Coast, and the rich bastard actually liked the demo we sent him. Then again, who could possible resist a band called 'Prey For The Devil'? But everyone knew it was my spectacular voice alone that carried the rest of the lazy fucks in the group. All I needed to do now was to convince Sonny to sign us and it would be Easy Street for me for the next couple of decades. I stuck my exquisitely long tongue out at the mirror and waved my arms up over my head while making the devil sign with my fingers. "Thank you, Cleveland! We love you all and goodnight!" I yelled into the air as I did every night at the end of a performance while flipping my waist length raven black locks behind me like some great Dark Lord's cape - the audience always went crazy for that.

Excitement tingled through me, knowing that in just a couple of hours I would seduce Sonny with my powers of persuasion and me and the rest of the boys would be doing interviews with Rolling Stone by the end of the week - yes! From here on out it'll be easy pickings, baby – they'll be lining up at the door to be doing business with me then! I laughed out loud at the glorious prospect. No more chasing contracts for me - no sir.

I slid a pair of skin tight red leather pants over my stick thin ass and a black T-shirt that had *Lucian Scott* written across it in giant red letters, each one dripping down as if the letters were bleeding - very cool and sure to impress Sonny. I stepped back out into the bedroom to find my young companions still naked, crouched on the bed with their asses sticking high up in the air and their faces pressed down on the mattress. At first I couldn't figure what the hell they were doing. I got close enough to hear the snorting sound and see the light reflecting onto the ceiling from the mirror they'd taken off my wall and placed on the bed. Long fat lines were stretched across the mirror like giant white caterpillars. The two girls were sucking them down through a rolled up twenty dollar bill as if they were spaghetti noodles. *The Lady and the Tramp* came to mind when both their faces met from either side of the same line. They both finally noticed that I had come back into the room and sat up on their knees and flashed wanting smiles at me - both their faces covered in powder and their massive tits jiggling

gloriously as they giggled. That's when I remembered why I let them come home with me last night.

The redhead licked her lips with a look in her glossy eyes that made my sore pecker struggle to salute her through the skin tight pants. The blonde grinned at the bulge and leaned over to the redhead and started slowly licking the powder off of her face with long exaggerated movements that practically got me off without ever getting out of my clothes. The redhead then stretched out flat on the bed while the blonde began pouring long lines of cocaine from a blue plastic vial down her belly – then started to lick the lines from off of her skin. That was when it became clear to me that I was most likely going to be late for my meeting with Sonny Cardigan. But what the fuck, the girls had gone to a lot of trouble here and it would be rude to leave a hot meal without eating it. I didn't want to seem unappreciative even if I didn't know either one of their names.

I ran into Sonny's office forty minutes late to find our manager, George, and my three band mates, Eugene, Tom and Chris all sitting in front of Sonny's enormous oak desk. They all gave me the usual fuck-you-man look because it was pretty much my M.O. to be late for everything. What can I say, the groupies were never-ending and finger-licking good. Sonny, an old dude of maybe forty or so, smiled from under his pencil thin mustache and goatee; all that was missing from his persona was the horns and pitchfork. The smile he gave wasn't the friendly kind and it quickly vanished as he started talking.

"So nice of you to have made it, Mr..." He then looked down at the paper on his desk before looking back up at me. "Mr. Louis Slug," he said with a tone of disapproval. He rolled his eyes up in annoyance.

I nodded my head at him. "Cool, isn't it? I legally changed it to impress the chicks."

This time he chuckled; it didn't sound any more genuine then the smile from before. He glared at me a moment before running out of patience. "I'm a very busy man, Bug, and I don't take kindly to having my time wasted."

His cheesy toupee, which was parted off to one side, danced about his head as he slammed his jaws down tight in anger. George gulped so hard that the sound filled the room while the other three guys turned white as bleached bones. At this point my heart sank into the pit of my stomach and I was pretty sure we were never getting a record deal.

Sonny, slack-faced, with an irritated glare in his eyes, abruptly stood up. “We’ll listen to your demo some more, guys, and I’ll get back to you,” he growled in a ‘don’t fucking hold your breath’ tone. And there it was, the royal kiss-off. The guys got up, each shook Sonny’s hand including George, who gave me a fuck-you-asshole smack on the shoulder as he and the others shuffled out the office door past me. Me, the little devil that I am, had no intension of leaving without a second chance at a deal. So as soon as the rest of them were out the door I rushed back over to sit in the chair directly in front of Sonny’s desk. He looked at me suspiciously. “Look, Bug or Slug or whatever the fuck your name is, I told you I’d get back to you.”

“Please, Mr. Cardigan, I’m really sorry for being late. I was going to tell you it was because I was working on a new song, but the truth is I was banging the hell out of two gorgeous chicks and lost track of the time. I’m really, really sorry, so please don’t take it out on the whole band because I’m an asshole who can’t get enough sex. I know you’ve listened to the demo and you obviously thought we were good enough to want us to come in today. Can’t we just please start over here and give us a second chance?”

I was begging like some kid trying to get out of a beating from his folks for getting caught with a bag of weed. Sonny smiled at me and this time it sent chills down my spine like a bad case of amplifier reverb.

“Well, Bug…”

“That’s Slug, sir.”

“I really wish I could help you guys out…”

The word ‘wish’ was exactly what I wanted to hear and before he could say the word, ‘but’ I cut him off. “You can help us out, Mr. Cardigan. You’re a world class producer that everyone listens to. Whatever you say goes in this industry, and I will personally do anything you want to make this deal happen.”

He sat back in his overstuffed leather chair just enough for it to let out an eerie squeak. He then smiled wide, showing all of his overly-whitened, perfect teeth. The overhead light casting a bright sparkle off of his gold-capped canines that glowed all the more from the leathery bronze tan on his face. The man was obviously not from the East Coast. His eyes twinkled with what I thought looked like excitement as he brought both his perfectly manicured index fingers up, rested them under his chin and just held them there while he stared at me for a few minutes, as if he was thinking it over. I

tried not to squirm in the chair, but the cocaine orgy I'd had with the girls made that completely impossible.

"Well, just maybe I might be able to help you boys out," he said finally. "Do you go to church, Bug?" he asked in a matter-of-fact way.

"That's Slug, sir." I replied. "And…no."

"That's too bad, Bug. Because I'm a righteous man. Me and my family go every Sunday, rain or shine, and I never fail to leave a couple of Benjamins in the collection plate to guarantee that my soul will be saved when that inevitable day finally comes." He smiled at me again and this time every hair on my body stood at attention. He was hitting a twelve on my creep-o-meter that only went to ten.

"If you would like me and the boys to join you for church, sir, we would be okay with that, but I can't promise that we won't burst into flames upon entering," I said with a laugh, trying to lighten the mood of the strange conversation.

"No, Bug, that won't be necessary." He paused again and his eyes sparkled even more than before as he got up, came around the desk and closed his office door. He then walked over and sat in the chair next to me and lightly placed his sweaty hand on my thigh. "So, tell me, Bug. Exactly how bad do you really want this contract?"

I had to swallow hard to clear my throat and wondered what this sick fuck was going to want, even though I had a pretty good idea. He smiled again and ran his hand up my thigh and let it rest right at my groin.

"I'm fond of good company, Bug," he explained. "I pray to the good Lord every Sunday to send me willing, talented young men like yourself that I can work closely with. Are you willing to be one of those talented men, Bug?"

"That's Slug, sir. And…I'm not quite sure what you mean?"

He slapped my thigh with his other hand while never moving the one on my groin.

"Oh, sure you do, Bug. All you gotta do is drop them dirty leather pants and bend over this here desk and let me be the righteous man that I am." He winked at me with his sparkling eyes. "You said yourself you couldn't get enough sex?" he added, with an evil sounding chuckle.

Fuck, I thought; and that he did, over and over again. I figured a sore ass was worth not messing up my chances of getting this contract and all the perks that would come with it. So I did as the man wanted.

When the deed was finally over I got myself dressed and he laid the contract on the desk - no pun intended.

“Here’s a two year deal with Cherubim, Bug. In it you and your boys will sign over all copyright to me and from this point on I own all and any music you produce under my label. In return you and your boys will get a million in cash up-front and be famous beyond your wildest dreams,” he said with a smirk as he pulled his Brioni Vanquish II suit pants back up over his hairy, pasty-looking beer belly and tucked his enormous pecker back into them.

I signed the contract and so did the rest of the band. As soon as Sonny signed his name to it, making it all official, the touring began - and just as he had promised, we became wildly famous almost overnight.

We worked twenty hours a day, along with endless interviews with radio shows, TV news and every late night talk show around. It took a little over six months, and dozens upon dozens of round-robins on top of the desk with Sonny with my pants down around my ankles, before we finally did get our picture on the front of *Rolling Stone* magazine. The venues we played filled first six-thousand seats and then ten thousand and the offers came in by the hundreds to be the spokes-models for everything from guitars and amplifiers to sneakers and milk. So many came that I could hardly keep it all straight between the performing and the Crown Royal, and of course all the beautiful groupies. But the schedule was brutal. Some nights we even did two shows; Sonny was making sure he got his money’s worth as well as all of the tail he wanted from me and each time the bastard took what he wanted, he would always say the same thing.

“I’m a righteous man, Bug. Contracts are the Lord’s way of keeping us on a righteous path to his glory. You signed the contract, now didn’t you, Bug? I own your ass now, Bug, my boy.” He would repeat this endlessly along with an evil laugh as he pounded the hell out of my skinny ass.

The brutal schedule and abusive plundering of my ass went on for just a little over a year. Germany; “I’m a righteous man, Bug.” Italy; “You signed the contract, Bug.” British Colombia; “Remember, you signed the contract, Bug; now bend the fuck over.” And on and on it went as we toured our way all around the world. Our first show, when we finally returned to the States, was to be the headlining act in Madison Square Garden, New York City. The place was packed; all 18, 200 seats sold out months in

advance. Sonny himself had taken a front row seat to admire all the boatloads of cash our band was making for the righteous fucker.

We came out on stage and ten foot high streams of flames blew into the air from the pyrotechnic cannons and the crowd went crazy. I held my head high and lifted my arms up over my head as the crowd screamed with overwhelming excitement. I let them scream for several minutes before I finally dropped my arms and let my chin fall to my chest. Instantly everyone in the audience went completely silent. When I lifted my head again I pointed at Sonny in the front row as I spoke to the crowd. “I’d like to introduce our producer, Sonny Cardigan!” I yelled enthusiastically into the microphone as I kept pointing at him.

The crowed screamed and cheered as he stood up and smiled wide – gold canine teeth sparkling in the unnatural light as the righteous man sucked in the jubilation around him by waving his hands high over his head, while making the sign of the devil with his fingers and pivoting slowly in a big circle so that no one would possibly miss seeing how glorious he was. I allowed him to bask in the limelight for several minutes before Chris, our bass player, began plucking out the opening notes of our biggest hit song.

The crowd went wild and as they cheered and Chris played alone behind me, I began to speak to them in a growling whisper.

“I’d like to ask you all tonight for your undying support. You see, Sonny, our producer here, wants to stop us from being heard by you wonderful disciples of ‘Prey For The Devil’ ever again, and if you don’t want that to happen you’ll have to be sure to let Sonny, KNOW HOW YOU FEEL!” I screamed the last words in a deep loud growl as I watched the smile fade from Sonny’s face. I then held up a lighter into the air above my head and as the spark ignited into a flame it was if the room was filled with propane and a roar of hot energy burst out in an invisible wave across the massive crowd of excited fans and we began to play our hit song, ‘Contract with the Devil.’

The reaction was immediate. With the swiftness of a school of ravenous piranhas they all descended on Sonny in an exuberant frenzy as me and the boys sang and played along. First they ripped his fingers off and threw them in the air. Then they tore his arms from his body and then his legs – throwing his severed limbs up onto the stage. Blood squirted like a fountain, high into the air, as pieces of his juicy flesh bounced on the stage and back off again in a rain of bloody chunks over the masses. Sonny’s

screams couldn't be heard over the roar of the bloodthirsty crowd as they pulled out his intestines and tossed them into the air and chanted, "Hail Satan!" They ripped and tore bits of him off until all that was left was a massive red stain upon the floor where he had stood. The torrent of blood on the stage rolled off the front edge like a crimson waterfall, only to splash all over the screaming fans below, while me and the boys just kept right on playing for the frantic crowd until the cops swarmed the place. We were hurried off the stage for our own protection and whisked away from all the bloody carnage.

Three weeks and countless public statements later, the band was exonerated from any wrongful involvement; the authorities had arrested three individuals who were found to be selling tainted drugs at the venue that night. I then bought Cherubim Records for a mere half a million dollars, which was less than a drop in the bucket for me after all I had gained from the touring and endless product endorsement deals. Now I sat in the late Sonny's leather chair behind his great big oak desk and proceeded to rip the contract that he had had with me into small pieces with my long sharp claws.

"Poor Sonny. Never saw what was right in front of him – perhaps because he was always behind me. It's the righteous men I covet the most, especially those who make wishes to help me, in my presence, for their own gain."

I looked at the pile of ripped paper that lay on the desk before me, and with just a single thought it burst into flames. I let out a hard laugh as I watched it burn. The office filled with the sound of bone cracking against bone as my horns burst out from the top of my skull. Then I took a long swig from the Crown Royal bottle and smiled to myself as I thought, "You signed the contract now, didn't you, Sonny? I own your ass now, Sonny my boy." Foolish little man should have been more careful who he signed a contract with.

About: *Hortenzia I Moscato*

H.I.M. - Hortenzia Ilona Moscato was born and raised in the suburbs of Connecticut where she still resides today with her husband Jerry and son Kainen. Although relatively new to the arena of horror

writing she has been an avid artisan of ceramic sculpture, mosaics and silver jewelry to name just a few for over twenty years. Hortenzia or Tenzi as she is known as to her friends and family is the first generation in the US of Hungarian emigrant parents with Hungarian being her first language before learning English. Due to the length and complication most have in pronouncing her name she prefers to publish under her initials for simplification. She considers herself a bookworm of all types of fiction but prefers horror and murder mysteries. H.I.M. has written two novels, Vampires' Song and book two in the series, The Sound of Blood which are both available on Amazon in paperback and as E-books which she classifies as hardcore horror rather than romance horror that many vampire novels are based on. She also has some upcoming short stories, Finger Sandwiches in the Gorefications II Anthology set to be released late 2013 as well as The Price of Blood in the Suffer Eternal III Anthology through Horrified Press set to be released in Autumn 2013 and Tools of Destruction in the Serial Killer Tres Tria Anthology through James Ward Kirk fiction also set for release in 2013. For more information about H.I.M. you can find her on Facebook at http://facebook.com/0010z

STAGING WITH THE DEVIL

By

Sergio “ente per ente” Palumbo

Edited by

Michele Dutcher

‘The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach’, or ‘*Wine maketh glad the heart of man’,* so the old proverbs went. In 1590, people usually had dinner at midday, between 11:00 AM and 12:00 PM, and supper in the evening. Husbandmen and others whose work was never done might even eat something as late as 9:00 PM. Other than that, in town, many houses had no proper kitchen at all, of course.

Most of the men anyway - at least the ones who could afford it – were used to meeting and having a few beers, perhaps some wine, in taverns late in the evening and especially at night, before falling asleep in their chair. Also the most recent news reports of the day were brought to the inns, while citizens of public affairs and others enjoyed the attractions of a favored house and had fun for a while. Common drinks were made up of wines including malmsey, claret and sack, and most of them were sweet and rather heavy, while beers were usually ales, made without hops, and tasted clearly flat at that time. They had to be flavored with just about anything; in fact many spices like nutmeg and clove were added to wine and even to beer.

Taverns in Elizabethan England were dark, obscure venues where you could usually find more delinquents than honest or common people. There were a few exceptions, of course…

Inside the house called “The George Inn”, situated on the south side of the River Thames in London, two literary men dressed in the fashion of the time were talking to each other and drinking abundantly. Oh, they had already drunk a lot so far, but they seemed to be eager to go on for some time, even though it was already late night. On other days, the company also counted Beaumont, Fletcher and Ben Jonson. Moreover, strangers who

had no literary interests would find any excuse for intrusion and knew well enough how to enter into the state of mind of those who served and those who gave orders; those who paid at once; the ones who could keep speaking without being interrupted; and men who talked too freely, for a very long time. But today there were only two playwrights at the inn, for several reasons, but none in particular.

The first man, of about 26 years, was named Christopher Marlowe, better known as Kit. He had two childish chestnut eyes, thin brown hair and a small mouth, and he was used to having a typical Kentish goatee. The other playwright was William Shakespeare, displaying a receding hairline that was a bit untimely given his young age, which was about the same as his friend's. William was still a poor playwright for Philip Henslowe, owner of The Rose Theaterin London, and mainly an actor who had yet to become the greatest author in English history, and was just struggling to eke out a living at that time. Marlowe, on the other hand, had already shown himself to be the master playwright of the two, and his name had been widely spread in Town because of his works and plays - even though the two men were the same age.

It was one of those warm nights in late spring when actors and the men of theaterwere roaming around the most famous, or ill-reputed, inns and taverns in that area of old London - as those buildings were within yards of the venues where the plays were first staged. A glass of wine after a mug of beer; some hours went by slowly, and the dead of night wearily approached. The George was a galleried coaching inn with upper floors that jutted out over the street and a peculiar wooden south face that seemed very pleasing to look at. It also was endowed with several connecting bars on the ground floor, while the galleried section, which contained accommodation for travelers, was very wide.

While the two had already started boasting and laughing at the top of their voice, other customers around kept on drinking and talking. The table where they sat was, anyway, a bit secluded from the others, so that gave them some privacy. Not that their actions or their behavior over the course of their life ever tended to that, in no way, of course…

At a certain point, Kit straightened out his dark doublet with separate sleeves and came up with a sort of small poem, one of those short and funny compositions playwrights and poets of those years were used to creating - especially when they were already inebriated and were enjoying a

good time. “Now listen to this: *Life is too short to drink bad wine, the same as it is to have only water, but if you try to steal a bottle of mine, then you’ll end up with being a mad rotter…”*

They loved to show their friends their ability to think up a poetic passage or displaying how quickly they could write one. It was also a part of the well-known professional rivalry between these figures, which was not an unusual thing during the Elizabethan period, of course. “Not bad,” William immediately replied, beating both hands against his whitish wide shirt. “But now hear this one: *“Good company, good wine, good irony, and a rhyme, can make wonderful people and let them feel as tall as a steeple.”*

“Well said, well said,” Marlowe burst out. “And now another mug of ale, innkeeper, immediately!”

“Make it two!” Shakespeare added straightaway.

Many runlets, that were various smaller amounts of wine, did run quickly over the course of such hours, and they could easily make your mind feel free and light, even though they also confused your thoughts and frequently left you with a headache afterwards. “Let me hear some new work of yours now…” Kit encouraged the other fellow.

“Well, I might do it…” William retorted. “That’s something I just started writing, it’s based upon a passage from *Holinshed’s Chronicles*, although the events I plan to depict differ extensively from that…”

“Just recite something you’ve already completed,” the other insisted.

Shakespeare got a grip on himself, or at least tried to, and said, “*There’s no art to find the mind’s construction in the features of…*”

“No, no!” Kit stopped him and cried out in a harsh tone. “It should be declaimed as the following: *‘Was this the face that launched a thousand ships, and burned the topless towers of the acropolis*?’ and then you should…”

“Is this something you are going to insert in the play you’re working on at present?” the other man asked Marlowe, being very curious. “It seems to be related to the ancient classics…”

“You’re right! And that is exactly what it is going to be, but I can’t finish any work these days. I don’t know why…”

Both of them were very far from home, but nowadays the dirty, though wealthy, capital had become their common dwelling. While they were talking to each other and drinking more glasses of wine, which had already started to have their effect by dimming their senses and clouding

their smart minds, a figure approached them. He was wearing a wide mantle, with a long gray, peculiar hat on his head, and he appeared before their wooden table that contained many empty bottles and a few mugs placed sideways. The newcomer didn't wait for their consent, nor did he introduce himself, but simply sat in a worn-out chair and stared at them in silence.

As the two, who had already noticed the unknown man but had preferred not to give importance to him, raised their heads and looked directly at him, a common phrase came out of their mouths: "And who are you?"

"Well then, pleased to meet you, sirs…let me introduce myself: I'm Lionel and I'm here for you two."

"And what are you here to sell us?" Marlowe asked him. "You should try somewhere else; I've no money left, except for enough to buy one glass of wine more..."

"Make it two…" the first author added.

"Well, if it's just a matter of wine, or of money, allow me to offer you some more, as you prefer, of course." And saying that, Lionel placed on the surface of the table a purse of heavy coins.

The two eyed him, and nodded in agreement.

"So be it!" Kit exclaimed. "Two runlets of wine more, innkeeper…"

As the newcomer kept looking at them both, questions came to the two playwrights. "Why are you here…in this place, I mean?" William asked the man.

"Well, actually, I'm here to propose a pact to you, as I know you are some of the best authors in the town of London."

"Of course we are!" Marlowe said, in a pleased tone.

"Really? Me, too?" Shakespeare said, looking surprised but smiling.

"Actually, I know that you are in trouble at the moment. I mean, as for you, Marlowe, you are undergoing writer's block and you, Shakespeare, are trying to get the reviews you think you deserve, of course, without much recognition so far."

"How do you know I'm having problems composing something new?" Kit asked, with a doubtful stare.

"And what about me?" his friend burst out. "You seem to know me well, but I've never seen you around here before, nor in a theater, as far as I can remember…"

“Well, it’s easy, sirs. I know what’s in your head because I have started turning my mind to your business. This is also because I think you are two interesting persons, for sure. Let me tell you that I am the actual Devil, therefore proposals and deals are my favorite field.”

“What? You must have drunk much more than us, surely…” a surprised Marlowe exclaimed, irony on his lips that showed off a wide grin.

“You didn’t just say that, really!” Shakespeare cried out, openly sneering at him.

“Well, just hear me out, and let me explain my offer to you. What if I could grant you the possibility of getting incredible success, to write the perfect work of art by means of which your name will be always remembered throughout the entire world?”

The two pondered his words, then started laughing, deeply laughing while their faces turned pale and clearly amused.

“Well, just let me show you that what I’m saying is true. Please, throw that empty glass to the floor, and I can assure you that it will not break.”

There was a short silence, then the first one took it and asked the man, “You mean this one?”

Lionel nodded.

So, he threw it to the ground, and it didn’t break, even though the noise coming from the hit clearly indicated that it had reached the wooden floor at full speed, certainly.

The two young playwrights looked at each other in silence.

“Again…” the strange individual invited them. And the glass hit the ground another time, and once again it didn’t break.

“You see? It will never break if I don’t want it to.”

At that point, an angry voice came from the opposite wall, where the innkeeper stood. “Hey, you! Stop that immediately. You damn men of theatre! You get drunk every single night and then start making a noise and breaking my mugs…”

“Alright!” Marlowe burst out. “You are a conjuror now…”

“Or a trickster maybe…” William pointed out. “What do you propose to us?”

“I repeat, what if you could write the perfect work that will give you success in the end? I mean, an unending, without term, great success in

your own language for the time being and for hundreds of years to come?"

"What is it about? The work of art you're speaking of…" Kit asked the newcomer.

"Yes, just tell us more…" Shakespeare insisted.

"It's a very good story, called 'The Whisperers' and tells the tale of a regal court which is going to fall, a country endangered because of some strangers, and a possible solution in the end. Or perhaps the tale of a man of science selling his soul to achieve knowledge, but who gets damned. Or maybe two powerful noble families, one against the other, whose sons and daughters love one another."

"That sounds interesting…I can see a lot of potential in that plot!" Marlowe looked surprised at the words.

"I think it's not bad…a love affair with politics involved as well… good idea!" William said.

"That's exactly what I thought," the newcomer smiled.

"But how can you grant us that? As the customers of a theater are always talking and you can't ever be sure your work will please them anyway…"

"Well, I'm the Devil himself, and therefore I can guarantee it will happen exactly as I say."

"Why don't you write it yourself?" Kit asked, being a bit suspicious.

"Yes, why don't you?" William nodded.

"I'm neither a writer nor a playwright like you."

"And what do you want in exchange?"

"The deal I propose involves the selling of your souls."

"Well, that's funny, as I'm atheist!" Marlowe exclaimed.

"So you don't believe in powerful creatures like me? Well, you shouldn't worry about losing your soul or exchanging it for something else then."

The other simply sneered, in an open way.

"And what about you?" Lionel asked young Shakespeare.

"I don't know what I really believe in, but these are not things to consider lightheartedly."

"So, may I go on with the details?"

"And whom between us are you going to propose this great offer to?" William inquired of the newcomer.

“At first, I thought I might start a sort of competition among you two, as I think both of your souls are valuable. But after considering the situation for a moment, well, I could propose it to both of you - as you could become co-authors of such works of art eventually.”

“And how do you want us to sign your pact?” Shakespeare asked.

“With blood, I imagine…” Kit supposed at once.

“Well said! That’s exactly how I do such things. I’ve been making these contracts for a very long time, from the most ancient of times, as a matter of fact. Is signing in blood a problem for you?”

The two thought about that for a few minutes. The decision wasn’t quite that simple - the one about the possible co-ownership of the works produced, of course… - not the matter of the soul, after all.

Then something unusual happened - well, something even more unusual than the present situation.

A short young man of about thirty, with blond curls and a big nose, wearing worn-out trousers and an orange shirt completely out of fashion, entered the inn and immediately headed for the table where the three sat. “YOU! I found you, finally! You did me wrong.” These were the first words the man said, obviously looking for a fight.

“What’s the matter with you, Alexander?”

“You know what you did, you ruined my life!”

“And exactly what have I done to you, poor Alexander? Didn’t you ask me to turn you into a man that the young woman you loved could find attractive? Before our agreement she wouldn’t even consider you, as you were tall, and ugly, and almost broke.”

“Yes, yes, you did make me attractive! But, damn you, the beautiful woman I’ve always been in love with, the woman who had finally agreed to be my wife, was affected by a deadly venereal disease, so now I’m doomed! And our marriage just took place last year…”

“I gave exactly what you wanted; we never spoke about making you disease free,” the one claiming to be the Devil replied. “And you looked very satisfied when you first kissed your love. Now your soul is mine!”

“You monster! I am not satisfied now because I’m going to die soon!” With that said Alexander lunged at the Devil who sat at the table, his arms ready to hit the target of his hatred and start a fight on the spot.

The Devil, or whatever he really was, simply stared at his opponent and, shaking his wrist, the oncoming individual stopped at once and then contorted himself in a strange way, his legs going to the left while his face and arms pointed to the right. As far as the two playwrights who were watching could see, it seemed that the man couldn't oppose him.

"You…release me, please! Release me now!" Alexander objected.

"Only if you promise you'll go away and leave us alone, as there are some important business matters that we are talking over."

The other man tried to regain control of his body, but he proved to be unable, and so he gave up in the end. "Alright!" he said, "I'll do as you tell me to."

"And now go back to your beloved woman, for the time that still is left to you…" the Devil said, smiling coldly. The other did exactly as requested.

At that point William and Kit, even though they were already a bit drunk, looked very attentively at what was occurring before their own eyes. They, too, paid attention to the man that sat with them at the table in a very different way, of course. The playwrights seemed to be silently telling each other that this endeavor could be dangerous.

"I see that some serious problems may come from the deals you sign," Kit noticed, making a sour face.

"And it's not something that seems to be of little significance, after all," Shakespeare said.

"This is only true if you don't clearly state what you really want. So, please, put your mind to all the details of the pact to be made before signing, and everything will be plain and fair, of course. No tricks and no swindles, but be warned, there will also be no add-ons or changes after the conclusion of the agreement!"

The two remained speechless for a while, pondering the present matter on their mind.

"Does the fact that we are drunk and full of alcohol interfere with our agreement, if we decide to sign it, after drawing up and reviewing the text again and again?" Marlowe asked the other.

"When the beer goes in, strange things may come out," William added.

"The quantity of alcohol you drink is something that may seriously damage your body and your life, but it is not a hindrance to our deal."

The two looked at each other. If all this was true - and they had no reason to doubt it, given the many wondrous things they had seen so far - they would be stupid to waste such a chance of obtaining unending glory and renown for the centuries to come. But they had to be wary, very wary, sure thing.

"You look a bit doubtful, and I understand your fear, but there is no reason for such anxiety. And this is not an offer to be lost, because I'll never offer it to you again! So let's get down to brass tacks. I'll leave you alone for two days, and then meet you at the entrance of this place, and then I'll listen to your reasons for accepting this contract or not." Saying that, the Devil stood up and simply disappeared, much to the surprise of the two playwrights.

***

The two days went by, and finally the day of the new meeting came, as the Devil had said that night at the inn.

As that strange individual named Lionel came to their table, wearing his usual wide mantle and with that peculiar hat on his head, William and Kit appeared to be calm, resolved. They were dressed in fine clothes, wearing embroidered doublets endowed with unwieldy, rich sleeves and - *the strangest thing of all as it didn't frequently happen*… - they were also sober and attentive to the events that were going to follow.

"Good morrow, sirs!" the one greeted them as he approached and sat at exactly the same table, precisely as he had done that night.

Kit spoke first. "We thought about what you said the last time we met, and we agreed that such a chance should not be missed. Therefore, we consent to becoming co-authors of that work of art that you proposed to us: the perfect play that will give us unending success, without limit, great limelight in our own language for hundreds of years to come."

"But there are some specific and important requirements to be fulfilled, before we'll sign your pact…" William said.

"Those being…?" The Devil smiled.

"We will never again meet in this life, before the time of our natural death…" Shakespeare told him. The devil simply wrote this clause on the old parchment that lay on the wooden table next to a mug of water.

“And you’ll never harm us in any way, as long as we live…” Kit clearly added. This request was also quickly inserted into the text.

“Be it as you say!” the other exclaimed. “And so just let it be binding once and for all…I need your living blood now, sirs. Put it on this old parchment that I have here.”

“Do you need our blood now?”

“Exactly…” the Devil replied. “And now it’s up to you, sirs…”

Marlowe was the first to pick up the knife that was on the table. Then he moved it to his arm and made it go under his long sleeve. Some blood spurted out and hit the parchment the Devil held before him on the wooden surface.

And so his friend, Shakespeare, did the same thing, making a similar move in order to have some blood come out of his wide sleeve.

“Then it’s done!” the Devil cried out in a tone of deep pleasure, as he knew that everything had been completed according to the rules. He stood up and left, as he had done two nights before.

After some time, when they were sure they were entirely alone, the two playwrights started speaking in a low tone. “Well, if everything goes well, it will be great…” Kit said.

“And I think it will,” said William. “I’m beginning to think of a story about two families that hate each other but their children love each other anyway. I could set it in Italy, a land that’s always in turmoil and full of deep hatred among the wealthy men but also among the poor ones, and I am sure it will be perfect, for sure!”

“And I’m just thinking of that man of science the Devil was telling us about when we first saw him. It is going to become my best work, I am certain of it!”

“Do you think the Devil will figure out our trick?”

“Who knows, but it seems that everything has gone perfectly so far.”

“Now we can remove the little bags of animal blood that we concealed up our sleeves...”

“It ruined my best clothes…” Marlowe noticed.

“It was for a good cause,” Shakespeare said.

“For the good of literature, of course!”

“A glass of strong wine to celebrate the present moment?”

“Make it two, and more!”

***

It was ten years later, almost at the end of the lives of the ones connected to the drops of blood Lionel had taken that day, that the keen Devil came back to London to exact his price and grab their souls. It was much to his surprise that he discovered that the call of the blood of the living ones he had just collected that day on his old leather parchment book led him to two different, unexpected places - and not to the two playwrights themselves.

The first one was the nest of an old squirrel inside a dead tree, while the other was a farm where an old male goat stayed. So, the Devil understood that the blood he had taken on that day and that had spurted out onto his parchment wasn't that of the two playwrights. They had made use of some blood that was very different from their own, even though it came from a living creature, as the traditions required. There was no other explanation!

"Damn' playwrights!" he exclaimed. "You never know what's really going on inside their minds. They deceived me! But what have they gotten? The deal didn't work this way in their favor…so what?"

And then he became aware that, after all, the pact signed that day had worked in some ways, as within the nest of the squirrel, all along the bark inside, there were many scratches - as if the animal that stayed there had tried to write something on the tree itself, producing a multitude of stories that were along the entire surface of the bark...even though no man could read it because the squirrel's language wasn't yet known to humans, of course.

And the same could also be said about the old goat. The magical blood did lead the surprised devil to a 'billy' who was said to have entered the farmhouse where he lived, and to toddle some parchment with his hooves, as if that creature also wanted to write something.

In a way, both the animals had profited from the pact the old devil had proposed. And the two, having been deprived unwillingly of a few drops of blood by the playwrights, had started writing the work of art he'd spoken about that night at 'The George Inn'.

Anyway, nobody in the whole world seemed to have known of their achievement, as no human being had ever tried to comprehend or find a way to understand the unknown squirrel's language or even the goat's hoof-

writing. If someone could have interpreted it, they would have probably discovered the best tragedy ever conceived of in the history of the world. Not that those animals had ever asked for that gift, nor did they care about it any way, after all…

About: *Sergio Palumbo and Michele Dutcher*

Sergio Palumbo is an Italian public servant who graduated from Law School, working in the public real estate branch. He has published a Fantasy RolePlaying illustrated Manual, WarBlades, of more than 700 pages. Some of his works and short-stories have been published on American Aphelion Webzine, WeirdYear Webzine, YesterYearFiction, AnotheRealm Magazine, Alien Skin Magazine, on Orion's Child Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine, Farther Stars Than These, on Digital Dragon Magazine, on Kalkion Science Fiction and Fantasy Web Magazine, on Quantum Muse, Surprising Stories, on EMG- ZINE, on The Speculative Edge Magazine, on Australian Antipodean SF, on British Schlock! Webzine, on Australian SQ Mag, and in print in numerous anthologies.

Michele Dutcher, aka Bottomdweller, lives in a carriage house in Old Louisville Kentucky with her border collie - Daisy Dukes. She has a BS degree in Elementary Education from Indiana University with minors in theology & sociology and has been writing Science Fiction stories for about a decade. She edits all the first drafts of Sergio's short stories.

SNUFFED OUT

By

Adrian Ludens

“I possess extensive resources, but a print of the film you’re asking for does not exist.” Werner shook his head as he spoke.

“You expect me to believe that?” Philip scoffed. “A rising star was murdered while the cameras rolled! Somebody has the original print, or at least a copy of it. I want you to find it for me.”

“I cannot help you.” The old man emptied his brandy snifter and set it on an oak end table. His unruly silver mane gleamed in the lamplight as he did so. Philip imagined leaping from his chair and kicking Werner in the face for playing games with him. He forced himself to stay calm and tried a different approach.

“I’m going to sign a blank check, Werner. You make it out for whatever amount you feel you’re entitled.”

“It’s you who feels entitled,” the old man retorted. “I say again: What you seek does...NOT...exist!”

The way Werner forced out the last three words took Philip aback. “But surely the police took the film canisters in as evidence.”

Werner seemed to soften. “I’m afraid not. The originals were destroyed.”

“I would think someone with your resources would have access to any number of films depicting actual deaths, accidental or otherwise,” Philip mused.

“You are quite mistaken.”

Philip slouched in his chair, stationed opposite that of his host. “When I was a boy my great-grandfather told me that back in the late-Twenties and early-Thirties when they still used 9.5 millimeter film, an actress named Mae Laurel gave the most authentic performances in Hollywood. But after what happened on the set of *Angel of Death* she was blacklisted and vanished from the public eye. If no print exists, how is the legend still alive today?”

Werner leaned back and considered Philip over tented fingers. “I can only tell you that one promising young performer snuffed out the life of another during filming and that the picture never got completed. *Angel of Death* has been erased from film history, and no one alive knows what events transpired on that day.”

Lionel Boyd sat in a canvas chair in front of his trailer and imagined the death of his costar. Mae Laurel; how he hated her! He took a final drag on his cigarette then tossed it aside and scanned the movie lot. A pair of set dressers carried painted flats past him. The late afternoon sun warmed the back of his neck. Lionel glanced at his watch. The entertainment reporter who’d requested an interview with him was late. Lionel didn’t like to be kept waiting.

His thoughts returned again to Mae. Lionel recalled her insufferable attitude the first time they had met. Lionel subscribed to the ‘learn your lines, recite your lines, collect your check’ school of thought when it came to acting. He believed if the dames wanted to give you extra attention, so much the better. But this Mae Laurel, what a piece of work *she* was.

“I take a sacred approach to acting, Mr. Boyd,” she had explained loftily. “I excel because I am a disciple of the Theater of the Spirit. Before each scene I say my prayers and die unto myself. In this way I truly become my character.”

What an intolerable woman!

“Mr. Boyd?” The query shook him from his reverie. “I’m Casper Bowman.” The newcomer mentioned the name of the newspaper he wrote for.

“How do you do?” Lionel extended a hand and favored the entertainment reporter with a luminous smile.

“Thank you for agreeing to this interview.” Bowman pulled a spiral bound notebook from his back pocket and produced a pencil from behind his ear. It reminded Lionel of his Uncle Lou, who had mastered the trick of pulling quarters from behind the ears of the kids in the family.

“Let’s begin by inquiring about your latest picture.”

“Certainly. It’s a talkie. My third. It’s a horror picture. I’m sure you’ve noted the success the studio has enjoyed these last couple years with horror pictures.”

“Folks certainly enjoy a good monster story,” the reporter agreed.

“Yes, well. We believe with this picture that we’ve taken things a step further. Though this is his directorial debut, Mr. Christopher Werner has an amazing pedigree. His father is—”

“Yes, yes I know all about Chris Werner. His father is a big studio exec and got him the job. You don’t have to gloss that over on my behalf. I know the drill.” Bowman winked.

“About the film then,” Lionel said. “I play a dual role as both hero and villain. My character falls in love with a girl, but my evil twin escapes from prison and tricks her into going away with him. This picture will have an amazing car chase scene unlike anything ever filmed. There will also be a climactic fight scene where I attack myself! I don’t fight myself, of course, but it will look like it. I’ll fight a stuntman. Actually, two stuntmen will fight each other but all the close-ups of both characters will be me.” Lionel trailed off. The guy from the paper hadn’t written down a word.

“Let’s talk about Mae Laurel.” Bowman leaned forward, looking eager. “Many would say she’s the most beautiful and talented young actress in Hollywood. She must be charming to work with.”

Lionel lit a cigarette to hide his annoyance and buy himself some time. “Ms. Laurel is certainly one-of-a-kind. Also on board is Mr. Pete Jackson, a makeup wizard. You’ve seen his work before in—”

The reporter interrupted him again. “If you’ll permit me to backtrack for a moment; the angle I’m taking for this article is what it’s like for you to work opposite Mae Laurel. Her whole ‘theater of the spirit’ approach to her craft is incredible, wouldn’t you say?”

Lionel resisted the urge to reach out and knock the hat off the reporter’s head. “I focus more on how I approach a scene. I learn my lines, I do what the director tells me and that’s that. All this mysticism blather is an affectation as far as I’m concerned.”

The reporter’s eyebrows shot up and his mouth hung open. Lionel couldn’t stop his self-satisfied smirk. Bowman must have misunderstood the look, because he relaxed and said, “Ah! Ya got me on that one!” He scribbled in his notebook then asked: “Have you ever participated in any of Ms. Laurel’s spiritual sessions?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I’m told that she has called upon the spirits of...” He flipped back several pages in his notebook and read: “Azrael, Yama, Mairya and Malak al-Maut for guidance in this particular role.” He flipped the notebook back

and gazed up at Lionel. “Have you noticed a clarity or elevation in her performance as a result?”

“Again, absolutely not.” Lionel took a deep drag and fought to stay composed.

“The studio found success with a female playing a feature role in the picture about the monster’s bride, but this is a whole new idea. Some would say the studio is taking a chance having a woman portray the only supernatural character in the picture. But most will agree that for a move this bold, Mae Laurel is perfect for the leading role.”

“Mae Laurel is NOT the lead!” Lionel angrily blew smoke from his nostrils. “I AM! If you want to talk about me, my career, and this role, I’d be happy to tell you all you need to know. But stop asking me questions about Mae Laurel! She’s created this mysterious aura around her, but it’s all a sham. And you’re buying into it! That woman is not only a crackpot; she’s arrogant and extremely difficult to work with. Why, once when I went to visit her, she ignored everything I had to say. She was too preoccupied moving her lamp around. We weren’t even filming! We were in her trailer and she was concerned about her lighting!”

Lionel realized several extras and crew members had stopped to stare. He felt like a dam had burst. His words had exploded from his mouth and now he felt spent and empty.

Bowman leaned forward and asked one more question. “When you propositioned her, she shot you down, didn’t she?”

“This interview is finished. I’m going for a walk.” Lionel stood up so fast he knocked over his canvas chair. He spun on his heel and walked right into the doughy girth of his director.

“You won’t be walking far,” Christopher Werner said.

The young director put a meaty arm around Lionel and the two began moving toward the sound stage.

“What was all that?” Werner asked.

“Nothing. Fellow from some rag asking me questions about Mae. He must have a crush on her or something. I got bored.”

“Listen, Lionel, this is my first picture. I’m under a lot of pressure here. We don’t need any bad publicity.” Werner tightened his grip to emphasize his point.

“Tell that to Mae. She’s too busy holding séances and sacrificing small animals to be bothered with memorizing her script.”

Werner snorted with laughter. He pulled a hip flask from the depths of a pocket, uncapped it and took a swig. He held it out and Lionel gratefully took the flask. “Good whiskey,” he said after a swallow. He tried to hand it back.

“Keep it while Pete gets you fixed up,” Werner instructed. “It’ll help soften the edges.”

The director patted Lionel on the back just as they arrived at the little room where the wiry little makeup artist worked his magic.

“Pete, here’s Mr. Boyd,” Werner said. “We’re shooting the electric chair execution scene in one hour.”

“Piece of cake, Mr. Werner, we’ll be ready,” Pete responded. To Lionel he said: “How you doing, Mr. Boyd?”

“I’ll survive.”

Pete guffawed. “Good one! But it’s my job to make you look like you didn’t.”

Lionel took a sip from the flask and sat down in the makeup artist’s chair.

“The scene films in an hour. If I hurry, I’ll have you out of this chair in fifty-nine minutes.”

Lionel sighed and tilted the flask again. Make-up sessions were another part of the job he barely had the patience to endure.

“Of course, the spirit gum, cotton, and collodion mask I’ll need to make for the close-up of your face at the end of the scene will probably take closer to two and a half hours to apply.”

Lionel took a swig.

“You know who I’d love to spend two and a half hours with? Ms. Laurel. She’s a real looker.”

Lionel took a gulp.

“Won’t let anyone near her trailer though.” Pete had begun to apply spirit gum around Lionel’s eyes. He would add wrinkles to enhance the appearance of worry, and cheek implants to raise Lionel’s cheekbones into a gaunter look.

“The way I hear it, she’s always in there meditating and praying for inspiration,” Pete continued as he reached for a brush from his kit. “I got something that would inspire her. It’s in my trousers.”

Lionel emptied the flask as Pete chortled, oblivious.

When Pete announced that he had finished —and with ten minutes to spare— Lionel rose unsteadily and shuffled into the darkened evening. He fumbled for another smoke and let his feet pull him in whatever direction they chose.

They chose Mae Laurel's trailer.

Lionel rapped on the door, intent on voicing his displeasure with her on all fronts. Her faux mysticism, her conceit, her stubbornness; all of it had to stop. Lionel pounded his fist on the door but she still didn't answer.

He flung the door open. Mae reclined, lithesome and graceful, on her chaise longue. She looked gorgeous and Lionel felt sexual frustration well up within him. He mounted the steps and closed the door behind him.

Lionel glanced around Mae's trailer. Cabalistic symbols had been drawn on her walls; diagrams lay scattered on a table. Candlelight danced around the room. Lionel moved closer to his costar.

"Mae."

She didn't respond.

"Mae!"

Still nothing.

"You too good to talk to me, or are you in a goddamn trance or something?"

Mae didn't even stir.

Lionel clenched his hands into fists. "Let me tell you something," he muttered. "I'm the star of this picture, not you. The man is always the lead. Beauty doesn't equal talent, y'know, and this whole 'theater of the spirit' gag is getting old. You've got some people hoodwinked, but not me."

Lionel glanced around the trailer again. In one corner he noticed a stack of newspapers and magazines. Mae gazed provocatively back at him from the top cover. He looked down at the genuine article lying on the chaise longue, and allowed himself a brief moment's admiration of her porcelain calves and trim ankles. Conflicting emotions roiled within him.

"Don't play with fire, little girl, you might..." Lionel's words trailed off as his eyes strayed to the flickering candles. On impulse he shifted forward and tipped one until it touched the heavy curtain. Flames ate the fabric in seconds. Mae did not stir.

Heart pounding in his chest, Lionel hurried to the door. He staggered from the trailer just as the flames enveloped the stack of magazines and the

papers on the table. He slammed the door and sprinted away into the darkness.

Lionel congratulated himself on escaping and returned to the sound stage without being seen. He waved casually at Werner and eased up beside Pete and a few others.

"We're under the gun here, people!" Werner barked. "We've got a lot to get in the can yet tonight, so everyone hop to it!"

"Waiting on Mae again," Lionel complained to Pete. "That's typical." He hoped some of the others in the crew would overhear him. It might allay suspicions if he griped about her then feigned regret over his words when the news broke that she was dead.

"She'll be here," one of the camera operators said. "She's a consummate professional."

Lionel swallowed a retort and walked onto the set. He sat down in the mock electric chair. To his right the set dresser gave last minute instructions to the actor who would throw the switch in the scene. Two small rows of already-seated extras gazed at him from the mocked-up gallery.

Max, the props master, knelt and cinched the electric chair's leather straps around Lionel's wrists and ankles. He attached the dummy electrodes to Lionel's temples. "This scene right here is the one the audiences will never forget," Max opined. "The Angel of Death takes a swipe at you just as the juice is turned on. This will be more shocking than when Karloff sat up on the slab."

"You said 'shocking'," Lionel said. "That's funny." He felt nauseous and uneasy. He passed it off as too much drink. Max finished his work and walked back behind the cameras.

"Has anyone seen Mae?" Werner asked. Lionel closed his eyes and tried to relax.

"Ah! There you are, my dear!" the director exclaimed and Lionel's eyes shot back open. He looked across the stage. A figure in a long black robe stood opposite him, holding a scythe. The figure's face and hands were hidden by the shadows of the charred and smoking fabric.

"That's excellent work, Boyd! Fantastic facial expression." Lionel didn't respond to the director's praise. He gave the mysterious figure his full attention.

"Quiet on the set!" Werner called.

The hands twisted the scythe and the blade gleamed in the light.

“This isn’t right!” Lionel mumbled.

“Angel of Death, Scene twenty three, take one!” A member of the crew clacked the clapperboard in front of the camera and stepped back out of the frame. “Action!” Werner yelled.

The black shrouded figure took one step forward. Lionel saw her face then and a hoarse scream erupted from his throat.

Mae Laurel fixed an avid gaze on him. Her face had been burned to a grisly mixture of red and black. Tendrils of smoke swirled from her charred flesh. One eyeball had burst from the heat of the fire. To Lionel, it looked as if it had slithered down her cheek and had cooked like an egg on a hot skillet. But the other eye looked upon him with hateful triumph. Her lips had been burned away leaving her teeth exposed in a tortuous leer.

“Someone stop this!” Lionel shouted. “I don’t deserve to die!” He desperately fought against the leather straps, trying in vain to free himself. Most of the cast and crew stood out of his field of vision but Lionel looked up and caught the eye of a gaffer watching the scene unfold from his place in the rafters.

“Why are you letting this happen?” Lionel roared at him. He turned back to the scorched and twisted face of his costar. She closed the distance between them, keeping the scythe blade raised. Mae now truly embodied the Angel of Death, she’d *become* her character. Lionel fought against the straps and wondered why she didn’t strike. Then it hit him; she was waiting for her cue.

Lionel glanced to his right at the extra in the police uniform, who had been gaping at Lionel, apparently taken aback by his ravings. Realization seemed to dawn on the man’s face and he pulled down on the dummy switch.

On cue, Mae Laurel lunged forward and swept the scythe toward Lionel’s throat in a broad arc.

Lionel Boyd attempted one final scream but the cold bite of steel cut it short. Heat became pain. He gurgled and convulsed as the cameras continued to roll. Lionel listened for any indication that help was headed his way, but heard none.

For nearly twenty seconds, no one moved. No one seemed to breathe. Then two of the extras in the viewing gallery bent over to vomit and two others passed out and toppled from their seats. A few crew members finally sprang into action.

“Who in hell gave Mae a real scythe?” someone shouted incredulously.

“Cut!” Werner called in a weak voice, a full minute after Mae had done just that. Lionel knew he’d underestimated her. All the meditation and incantations had worked.

“You still with us?” Lionel recognized Pete’s voice. It sounded like it came from a great distance. “Sweet Mary! I’ve never seen so much blood.”

The wounded man tried to speak. Everything around him seemed to flicker. Lighter, darker, lighter, darker. It reminded Lionel of the silent films from the early days. He felt a surge of pride when he considered his burgeoning career. He imagined the movie poster for *Angel of Death*. He would have top billing, of course. After all, Lionel Boyd was fast becoming a bona fide star; an actor synonymous with films on the cutting edge.

“After the incident, the authorities were called, of course. A doctor pronounced Boyd dead at the scene. Someone finally decided to check Mae’s trailer, but by then it had burned to the ground. No body was ever recovered, you see. And no one could prove who wielded the scythe for the killing stroke. Boyd died and Mae went missing. Those are the only undisputable facts.”

The old man gazed into space for a few moments. He sipped his brandy and resumed.

“The studio heads ordered all film reels destroyed. Even publicity materials were burned so quickly no one had time to abscond with a morbid souvenir. No one in the cast or crew ever spoke of the project again for fear of being stigmatized themselves. Only a precious few even recall the story and fewer still know any details. It is truly an instance of a legendary event for which no material proof exists.”

Philip sneered. “If there’s no evidence, how can anyone vouch for the legend’s credibility? It’s the Hollywood equivalent of an old wives’ tale, and you’ve bought into it more than anyone.” His frustration had gotten the better of him and the words kept coming. “I figured you were just an old has-been, but it’s worse: you’re a gossip who loves the notoriety.”

Werner stared coldly at his guest. He set his snifter on the end table and gripped the arms of his chair. “How dare you insult me in my own home? After dining on my food and drinking from my liquor cabinet! My *grandfather* always felt responsible for this tragedy. As the director, he blamed himself, you see. Isn’t that why you sought me out, because I am a

Werner? My grandfather went to great lengths to insure the names and legacies of both stars remained untarnished, though he never had any notion of the truth. He met with Mae clandestinely, hoping she could shed some light on what had happened, but she gave him no answers."

The old man's nostrils flared and his rheumy eyes seemed to glitter in the lamplight. Philip shifted uncomfortably, not knowing what to say.

Werner seemed to make up his mind. "Very well; you shall have your proof. I'll show you why the legend still lives today, and why I cannot help but perpetuate it."

The old man rang a small bell and a towering manservant appeared in the doorway.

Philip felt a triumphant smirk rising on his lips. "I thought you said no print of the film existed."

Werner ignored him. Instead he produced a ring of keys from his pocket and selected one. "Take this key, Hans, and unlock storage vault number six," he instructed the servant.

Even in the muted light of the sitting room, Philip could see the big man's apparent discomfort. He licked his lips and replied. "Yes, Mr. Werner."

Philip was stunned when his host produced a snub-nose revolver from another pocket and trained it on him. Hans disappeared and Werner smiled coldly. Philip realized he'd pushed the rich old eccentric too far. The shadows in the corners of the room seemed to encroach until he felt as if he were spotlighted on an otherwise dimly-lit stage. Sweat stung his eyes but he refrained from wiping it away. He was afraid Werner would shoot him. Better to sit here and let the old man have his way. Though still intrigued by the film, Philip's chief concern now was the gun clutched in Werner's hand.

Someone screamed from below them in another part of the mansion. Hans, Philip thought, playing along with Werner's scheme. They wouldn't scare him. Philip narrowed his eyes and tried to will himself to relax but Werner's face had gone ashen. The old man seemed to be trying to make up his mind whether or not to leave his seat when sounds whispered from just down the hall. An oily shadow crawled ahead of the approaching figure and across the threshold. Philip heard joints creaking and fabric rustling. Dread nearly became a physical object, rising rapidly up Philip's limbs and torso. His breath came in tiny gasps. What the hell was this?

He darted his eyes back to his captor. Werner sat bolt upright; the knuckles of the hand not holding the gun had gone white from gripping the arm of the chair.

Philip realized a figure had entered the room. He could feel the temperature plunge as it approached. Tears spilled from his eyes and froze half way down his cheeks. His teeth chattered and his body shook.

A towering black-cloaked figure obscured his view. The figure did not stand on the floor, but instead hovered above Phillip, its head close to the ceiling.

One gnarled hand brushed the hood back and revealed a visage that left the landscape of Philip's mind scorched and barren.

The blood-slicked blade of the scythe gleamed in the lamplight. Philip kept his head tilted up, neck exposed for the next sweep of the blade as he gazed in admiration at this legendary actress who still played her part so well.

About: *Adrian Ludens*

Adrian Ludens lives in the Black Hills of South Dakota. His collection, Bedtime Stories for Carrion Beetles, is available from your favorite online bookseller in multiple formats. His short stories have appeared in the anthologies: Blood Lite 3: Aftertaste (Pocket Books), Darker Edge of Desire (Cleis Press), and Blood Rites (Blood Bound Books), among others. Magazine appearances include Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Woman's World, and Big Pulp. Visit Adrian at curioditiesadrianludens.blogspot.com

SUFFOCATO CLAMORIBUS

By

Benjamin Welton

I called my boss at four with my latest project idea. I had recently grown tired with my typical stuff—short, acerbic reviews of indie electronica. I don't like electronic music that much and constantly writing about something you find distasteful tends to wear on the nerves. So, in a fit of exhaustion, I landed on an idea that I had been obsessing about since the age of nineteen.

I was about to tell my boss and primary editor Derek this, but, since I was worried that his answer would be an emphatic "No," I lit a cigarette and poured out some cabernet—my typical nervous drink. After a few moments of pleasantries, I got around to it in my own way.

"OK, Derek—I got a great article idea. It is a little strange, and it's not something we've ever done, but I think our readers will eat it up."

"With that kind of introduction, I guess I have no other choice but to listen to whatever it is you're about to sell me."

"Trust me, this is a good one. Ever heard of Zach Grieg?"

"No, never."

"That's not surprising—few know who old Zach Grieg was. What about Count Gríma?"

"Whoa, wait a minute. If this is about that creepy metal dude that chopped up his girlfriend, then I don't know what you are thinking."

"Just let me lay it all out. I promise you that it'll all make sense."

So there I went. I told him about the sordid history of Count Gríma. Zach Grieg was born to a single mother in a trailer park in Afton, New York—a town that made headlines back in the Victorian days due to a traveling party that got stuck in a January snowstorm. That alone wasn't the thing that made that event memorable; for snowstorms running amok weren't terribly newsworthy then (or now). What fascinated and terrified people about the Afton story of 1889 was the fact that the traveling party resorted to cannibalism in order to offset their starvation. The mother and father ate their children first like a steam-era version of Gaia and Uranus. And when

they were finally found after a brief thaw, the sheriff's department recorded that both survivors (whose names were never released for the sake of their own safety) had severe bite marks and cuts on their arms, almost as if they had started to snack on each other out of desperation. It seems that particular town in upstate New York, which most people simply drive past without a second look, breeds a certain transgressive quality, for cannibalism is present in the story of Zach Grieg, alias Count Gríma.

Zach's mother was not well liked in the trailer park, and was reputed to be both a drug dealer and a prostitute. In a rare interview for the American Violence 'zine, Count Gríma stated that he believed his mother was the scapegoat of a very diseased and small-minded community, but he also vividly remembered seeing many strange male faces in his family's trailer during the nighttime. Such contradictory information is ever-present in anything dealing with Grieg/Gríma—a man who purposely shunned fame and often lied in interviews in order to keep his private life buried.

What is certain though is that young Zach never stayed in one place for very long. Between ages two and sixteen, Zach and his mother lived in New York, Tennessee, Louisiana, Texas, Ohio, and Michigan. While living in Lansing, Zach dropped out of high school and left home for good. His first stop was Ann Arbor where he formed a crust punk band with kindred souls called Alarmist. Alarmist only played about six shows in and around Ann Arbor, and their entire output consisted of a five-song mixtape that is currently in the possession of Count Gríma's former band mate Rich Sullivan, aka Lord Girsu. Despite repeated calls for it from fans and other metal enthusiasts, Sullivan refuses to upload the Alarmist mixtape on the Internet. His stated reason is typical black metal elitism: "Count Gríma did not make music for the herd. His music is only for the strong and select few brave enough to receive his true, anti-cosmic nihilism."

After the demise of Alarmist, Zach, who was by then calling himself Count Gríma—an unholy demon who wore the standard corpsepaint and black cloaks. In the same interview with American Violence, Count Gríma said that Zach Grieg was possessed by a misanthropic demon one night while he was drunkenly desecrating graves in Detroit. Ever since that night, there was no longer a Zach Grieg, only Count Gríma. What he forgot to say in that interview was that "Count Gríma" was actually based on his affinity for the treacherous and sycophantic Gríma Wormtongue, Saruman's servant

in Rohan. Such omissions aren't surprising—it's hard to maintain an evil reputation after your arch-nerdiness has been exposed.

All things aside, Count Gríma the man/musician started his next band, Imperial Crucifixion, in Cleveland. Imperial Crucifixion were a super-fast and grinding black metal act who got a notorious reputation for their deadly serious demeanors. Never smiling, never talking on stage or off, and never seen during the day, Imperial Crucifixion stood out in Cleveland, a city then dominated by metallic hardcore, with local bands such as Ringworm, Integrity, and One Life Crew being incredibly popular in the underground. Imperial Crucifixion's outsider status strained the relationships within the band itself, plus the fact that they couldn't book shows outside of Cleveland further increased tensions within the band. After a year together, Imperial Crucifixion broke up. Their entire catalogue consists of one live bootleg called In the Grimness, a hard-to-find artifact of the early American black metal scene.

It is at this point when the story of Count Gríma takes its first interesting turn. Sick of managing personalities, Gríma struck out on his own as a solo artist. He moved into an old and ruined house in rural Braxton County, West Virginia. It was there in that house that Gríma would go on to record over ten full-length albums, only one of which was released by a record company. Before that record—1999's Forever Against the Dawn—Count Gríma had self-produced, self-recorded, and self-released all of his albums on cassette tapes that were traded between fans across the world. These albums contained some of the rawest, grimmest, and most ambient black metal ever. Gríma's howling and wretched vocals were often accompanied by Gríma's trademark blast beat drumming, high-tuned and disgustingly fuzzy guitar, anvil-heavy bass, and mournful synthesizer. Such albums as Digging the Depths of Fratricide (1996) and Worship the Dead Slut (1997) are classic black metal releases that have been name-checked by such popular black metal acts as Marduk, Abigail Williams, and Satanic Warmaster.

The buzz generated by these releases attracted the attentions of Geoff Kessel, the founder and owner of Frost & Poetry Recordings. Kessel got Gríma to sign a contract, and his last album—Forever Against the Dawn—appeared on Frost & Poetry. Forever Against the Dawn is by far the most unique Count Gríma release. For starters, Forever Against the Dawn is a slower, more dirge-like album that Count Gríma himself called "funeral

music." The album also contains strange acoustic and minimalist interludes that only serve to heighten the mystery surrounding the album.

But, of course, Forever Against the Dawn is remembered more for what Count Gríma did outside of music during its recording. Infamously, the track "Suffocato Clamoribus," which Frost & Poetry refused to include on the final mixing of the album, has taken over the mythology surrounding Count Gríma. "Suffocato Clamoribus" is an hour long recording of Count Gríma's murder and mutilation of Sarah Hume, his girlfriend at the time. The track also supposedly contains Gríma's suicide, which was accomplished via a Ruger .22 pistol.

Now, I say "supposedly" because no one has actually ever heard the recording. Many say that it was burned by Gríma's friends or by the record company itself, but still others maintain that it is still floating around somewhere out there. Those who believe the latter compose a sort of Gríma cult that is dedicated to publishing not only "Suffocato Clamoribus," but also Gríma's journals which are said to contain evidence of his practices in chaos magick and theistic Satanism. Also, to add more absurdity to the gruesome tale, the journals might also show that Gríma cooked and ate Sarah.

"OK, so where do you come in all of this? Forgive me; this is a great story and all, but what the hell does it have to do with Sonic Sounds?"

"Here's the part that's important. With your backing, I plan on doing a piece about tracking down not only the lost recording of 'Suffocato Clamoribus,' but also Gríma's journals."

"Jesus! How long are you planning to take?"

"Just give me a week, and I'll get you the story of the year."

"Christ, Kyle. Go ahead and do it."

I spent my first day on assignment brushing up on my already serviceable knowledge of Count Gríma. I broke out all my Gríma records and tapes, I read over his scant few interviews, and I surfed the web, looking for maps of West Virginia. I figured that after getting all the necessary background information in New York, I'd eventually fly out to West Virginia and spend a night out in Gríma's old home/abattoir. I thought it'd give my article that extra ghoulish slant that readers tend to love.

I woke up on the second day at my usual noon. I downed a few cups of coffee and made breakfast with the only food I had left in my place. After making myself somewhat presentable, I called up my best bud in the city—

Adam. Adam runs a record store in Greenpoint (he used to run one in Williamsburg, but he got sick of "those fucking smelly-ass hipsters") and he knows everything about everything, but he has a particular fondness for the obscure and the obscene. I knew he'd be a good resource for any information regarding the mysterious cult of Gríma. I met Adam in his store. He was working alone and no one else was there.

"What's good, bro? Working on an article about fucking Count Gríma, eh? That's killer. What can I do for 'ya?"

"I figured you'd be the best guy to talk to regarding the murder of Sarah Hume and the subsequent activities of those weirdoes looking for 'Suffocato Clamoribus.'"

"That's a lot to ask. Got a lot of time?"

"Yep, and it looks like you do, too."

"Asshole."

With that Adam got down to all the specifics. Sarah Hume had only been Gríma's girlfriend for a few weeks before he murdered her. They had met online back in the primordial days of the Internet, and she had moved from western Maryland in order to be with Gríma in his gloomy and isolated farmhouse. Apparently Sarah was a known methhead with a criminal past, so such a move did not raise many eyebrows. What did, however, was the fact that she was reported to the Braxton County Sheriff's Department only a day before the murder. Sarah had been caught shoplifting at the local Shop-and-Save, and upon questioning, the deputy on duty noticed sharp abrasions and cuts along Sarah's arms and legs, almost as if something had been chewing away at her.

Well, this got Sarah transferred to an area hospital for observation. Since it was a Podunk hospital without much in the way of security, Sarah managed easily to break away sometime during the night. She hitch-hiked back to a VFW and from there she walked back to Gríma's farmhouse. It was then that she was killed during a domestic dispute. Or at least that's how the police report goes.

"I got it on good information that Sarah willingly volunteered for it. She was a junkie, so clear thought wasn't something she was used to, you know what I mean? Plus, the chick was totally committed to Count Gríma: the man, the music…the mystique. Dude, it might have even been her idea."

"Why? Why do it?"

“Think about it. The Norwegian dudes always tried to be more evil then the next guy. One burns a church, so the next guy killed a fag. OK, then the next dude goes and kills a band mate AND tries to do some terrorist shit from behind prison walls. The problem is that none of this got on record; none of it infected the music. Two separate entities, jack. What if you combine the two and make evil deeds make evil music? That’s what they did.”

“That’s just conjecture. Not impossible, but it makes the whole thing creepier. What about all those people trying to get the recording and journals? What do they think? What motivates them?”

“They wouldn’t be much of a secret organization if some cocksucker record store owner in Brooklyn knew their thinking. As it is, this group may be all legend.”

“Yeah, well for the purposes of my bank account, let’s hope they aren’t.”

“How do you intend to find out if they’re real or not?”

“Keep sniffing around and pray that one of their heads pops up.”

“Whack-a-creep?”

“Something like that.”

I went across town to Greenwich to meet Anders, an old eccentric I knew through the remaining remnants of the punk rock scene in New York. Anders had lived in the Village since the ‘70s like Richard Hell, and he looked like him, too. When he’s not blitzed on coke, Anders does Tarot readings and sells occult items out of his apartment. Like Adam said, junkies and clear thought.

“Kyle, Kyle, Kyle. How’s it, man? You working right now? Need some stuff? I got some stuff that’ll jazz you right up. How about it?”

“Information would be nice.”

“Damn, man. You talk like a pig.”

“Close. Investigative journalist would be more accurate. I am writing an article about Count Gríma, a real fascinating dude.”

“Count Gríma…Count Gríma. Never heard of him. A rocker?”

“Black metal. He was deep into the occult, too. He was into real heavy shit: chaos magick, theistic Satanism, the Left Hand Path.”

“Negative, man. I am white warlock; I don’t do that kind of evil stuff.”

“Yeah, but you know about it, and that’s all I want—information.”

“Sorry, pal, but I am not sure if I can give you anything too solid. Chaos magick is a tricky bag; a lot of it is all about unorthodox methods and anarchistic thought. Trying to define chaos magick for you would be like trying to define the word “nature.” It all boils down to individual interpretation.”

“This guy I am looking into exposed pretty nihilistic and misanthropic views in his lyrics. It might have all been an act, but something inside of me screams ‘no.’ Count Gríma is famous for killing someone and recording it, after all.”

“Sounds like one bad dude. My guess, for what it’s worth, is that this guy coupled his chaos magick, which mostly pertains to the expansion of the individual’s consciousness, with Nietzschean Übermensch ideology and a healthy diet of big ego thinking. Leopold and Loeb come to mind; the anarchist terrorists of nineteenth century France do too.”

“I didn’t need confirmation that he was an unsavory person, but I would like to ask you why, let’s say hypothetically, a bunch of people would want to get their hands on a chaos magician’s notebooks?”

“I wouldn’t know, honestly. Chaos magicians have a reputation for being revolutionaries. Maybe you need to broaden out your horizons to include the possibilities of a politically-motivated group.”

…

There was a note stuck in my mailbox on the first floor of my building. It was a simple index card with “Stop Sniffing” written in all capital letters. Obviously, such a gift worried me. I went to my super—Mrs. Echeverri—and asked her if she had seen anyone odd lingering around this afternoon. She, of course, said no.

When I got up to my apartment on the fourth floor, not only did I lock the door, but I finally put my bolt lock to use for the first time since moving in eight months ago. Suddenly my safe neighborhood didn’t feel so secure; my castle walls were pregnable. I got out the wine again and I rolled a joint to calm myself. It didn’t work all that well, and I didn’t fall asleep until after four. A call on my cell phone woke me up at eleven. It was Adam.

“Kyle—I found a guy who’s heard the track. He says he’s willing to meet you in the store tonight. Says he never goes around in the day—he’s one of those real-life vampire queers. Might want to rub some garlic on your neck and dick…just to be safe.”

“I hate you and love you at the same time. I’ll be at the store at eight.”

…

A guy in a gray t-shirt and light blue jeans followed me to the subway. He stayed a car away during the ride. I got off a stop late to lose him, and it worked. I had to make up a lot of blocks until I finally got to the public library. When I got right by the lion, two things rippled through my brain: 1) Ghostbusters; and 2) how much shit is coming my way?

I spent well over five hours in the library reading about the occult. I went through such ye olde oddballs as Eliphas Levi and Montague Summers, then I started digging into the more disgusting Ariosophists and the wonky Theosophists, all before ending my library day with several articles and entries written by modern techno-occultists, neoshamans, and Discordians. I enjoyed it all, and I certainly left feeling enlightened, but I felt no closer to Count Gríma or his ghost.

I got to Adam’s store ten minutes early. I wanted to figure out exactly how much he had let spill about my article.

“That’s the crazy thing, bro. He came up to me; I didn’t say shit.”

“So, you’re telling me that people know about all of this and you didn’t tell anyone anything? Also, you and I don’t know these people. Does that sound right to you?”

“Looks like it. I wouldn’t get too worried. Can’t keep secrets from the Internet; it was bound to see the light o’ day.”

“You’re right, but it isn’t helping me at all. I got a cryptic note in my mailbox last night. Somebody or some bodies want me to “Stop Sniffing.”

“Heavy. You’re stuck in a horror flick, bro.”

I heard the obnoxious bell over the store’s door ring. A customer came in wearing a gray t-shirt and light blue jeans. It was eight o’clock exactly.

“I saw you earlier today outside of my apartment. I heard it that you don’t go around during the day.”

“I normally do not, but this is important. My name is Aeshma.”

“Really? I had you pegged as a Gary.”

“Christ! How much fun in the ‘80s did your parents have?”

“It’s my clan name, alright! I don’t want you to know my real name because they’d kill me if they knew what I am doing right now.”

“Wait, who’d kill you?”

“It’s part of my story involving that song you’re after—that one that sounds like a girl getting killed.”

“It is a recording of a girl being killed. Her name was Sarah Hume.”

“Oh God. I guess I should have expected this level of sickness from them.”

“Again, what type of people are we talking about?”

“Typical mid-twenties urbanites: fashionable, opinionated, and recreational drug users. I met a few of them through my clan. I never thought much of them, but when my partner Stolas told me about this party in Carroll Gardens, I got excited. I don’t leave the house much, so just seeing other people sounded pretty good.

“The party itself was in this amazingly well-kept brownstone with a fantastic front garden. From the outside it sounded dead, but there were easily twenty people in that one apartment. A few of them were theatre people and a couple others worked as yoga instructors. But most of them seemed like trustafarians—you know, suburbanite white kids with dreads and their parents’ money. They talked a lot about the best vegan and/or organic restaurants, their bikes, and music, most of which I’d never heard of. That was the main topic of conversation.

“The subject of music had been instigated by the hostess, Alpha Nurmi. You see, Alpha was a music critic for Vice for a while, but drugs got the better of her and her already-small work ethic. She is now just a full-time hostess and a sometime freelance writer. Still, music is her passion, and she has a special fondness for obscure and weird recordings. I think the record you’re looking for fits that description.

“Well, at some point during the party, Alpha challenged all of us to see if we were brave enough to listen to a recording of a real murder. Those guests who were already well into their cups or over-baked already enthusiastically proclaimed their bravery, while the rest of us merely tried to decipher Alpha’s level of seriousness. When the tape began to play, I started to feel incredibly scared for myself. Hearing those awful screams made me feel like I was inviting something into my world by just listening. I felt totally threatened, plus I was touching my chest, feeling the fast beats of my heart. You know what I was thinking about?”

Adam and I both shook our heads.

“Ever read Less Than Zero? There’s this one scene where a whole party of drunken surfer types watch a snuff film involving two white pre-

teens and this fat black guy. You never see the film, or rather read it described, but you get to see these surfers talking about whether it's real or fake. The disgusting thing is that a lot of them got boners watching the movie. All I could think about while listening to that song was how many of these terrible people are being turned on right now? It was a filthy thing, and I hope you destroy that tape when, or if, you get it."

"Are you afraid that the people at the party don't want you to blab about what they enjoyed listening to so much?"

"I don't know, but some of them have definitely been following me. I've recognized a few of them on the train, in bookstores, and in my neighborhood café where I get dinner most nights. One of them even left a note under my door last night. That's why I had to see you today."

"What did the note say?" I said this with a little more force than I would have liked. I saw Adam scowl at me for a split second.

"It said 'You better learn to unhear things or else.' It was on a note card and it was handwritten. All caps."

"Wow. Now I know why you're so nervous. I am sorry that this had to be the way we met, dude. You should call the police or something."

"I already did. Anyway, I am going to my mom's house on Long Island for a few days. I hope you really destroy that tape, whatever it is."

With that he left. Adam and I talked a little longer. I found Alpha Nurmi's address on her own blog. I decided to pay her a visit that very night. It took me almost forty-five minutes to get to her brownstone. It wasn't a loud area, but the incessant noise of parties in New York begins to sound like cicadas in the South—just background noise. The place was squatter than I had imagined, but it still had more charm than my near-flophouse apartment. What caught my attention and held it was the open door—a sight never seen in New York, despite its Giuliani-brought safety. The door was barely ajar, but it gave off some truly bad vibes. Those feelings didn't stop me from going in, however. By that point, I was certifiably dedicated to my project and my soon-to-be-legendary reputation at Sonic Sounds.

Alpha's apartment was on the first floor to the right. I could tell because her door was also open. Alpha, or what I at the time only assumed to be Alpha, was lying not far from the open door. She was clearly dead. In the few seconds that I looked at the body, I could tell that her death had something to do with the knife sticking out of her throat. Rather than search

for the tape, I decided to leave the apartment and not give the CSI team any opportunity to suspect me of murder.

When I got my shaken body back to my apartment, there was another letter waiting for me. This had been the most handwriting I'd seen in forever, and only a few days before I would have told you that snail mail and actual letters were a dead tradition. This letter was quite different from its predecessor: it was not a notecard, but a piece of stationery with a fancy letterhead that looked like a wealthy family's coat-of-arms. The writing was also far more refined and stylized in comparison to the terse "Stop Sniffing" correspondence. The letter went as follows:

Mr. Sacco,

I would like to invite you to my home tomorrow afternoon. I am someone who is interested in your research, and I would like to help you in any way that I can. I am far from a crank, and I have no bad intentions towards you. Please arrive around one at the address listed on the envelope.

The address was a townhouse on the Upper East Side. This was the command of wealth, and despite my hesitation, I found myself the next day in front of an Upper East Side door with an ornate brass knocker. A Hispanic cleaning lady in a gray and white uniform let me into the foyer and led me down the hallway into her employer's study. The man seated in the red leather chair surrounded by glass-fronted bookshelves looked like the picture of Viktor Shklovsky that my college textbook on twentieth century literary criticism carried within its pages. He was a bald man who was probably near sixty but looked closer to forty. He was wearing a blue bow tie with white polka dots, a white Oxford shirt, and a fawn colored sports coat. There was a cigar with chocolate dark wrapping on his desk, which was itself covered with legal pads and white pieces of paper.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Sacco. Would you like coffee, water, a cigar? How about some stronger stuff?"

"I am not opposed to day drinking."

"You are already doing well in my book. Raquel!"

Raquel brought us two Jack and Cokes. My first taste was amazing, and so were the next ten. They were so glorious that I made a request for a second go-around. It was just as pleasant as the first.

"Mr. Sacco, I want to get right to the point. I would like to personally hire you to retrieve the Count Gríma material that you have been looking for."

“OK. Is this out of the goodness of your own patronage, or I am presently waiting for a catch?”

“You have the reporter’s cynicism, don’t you? Are you ultimately thinking about becoming a journalist?”

“With all due respect, I think of myself as a journalist already. A critic at the very least.”

“I see. Well, regardless, the offer is there. I pride myself on being a collector, and despite my appearances, I am actually a fan of Count Gríma’s music. I can adequately supply the necessary funds for your project, and, further, I will reward you handsomely if you can obtain these objects in an expedient manner.”

“How fast are we talking?”

“Two days’ time.”

“I don’t think I’ve written a review that quickly. What makes you so confident that I can deliver?”

“Maybe the stars are right; maybe I like the look of your nose. Whatever it is, I have faith in you, Mr. Sacco.”

“I guess that makes about as much sense as anything else. Any suggestions?”

“There’s a concert tonight that your friend Adam Reeder knows about. You might want to accompany him. Oh, and I know that you are thinking about reporting what you saw last night to the police. I would suggest that you just carry on and not concern yourself with any of that.”

I tried to look nonplussed, but I failed because that smirking bald bastard gave me a slight and slimy wink, as if to say “I got your ass.” I spent most of the rest of the day holed up in my apartment with massive anxiety and a bottle. I successfully finished the bottle, but couldn’t conquer my nerves, so I did the only thing I am truly adept at: getting blotto.

By the time I met Adam outside the bar, I was having balance problems and I was starting to think about investing in a pair of glasses. With a kind hand from Adam, I got inside. I was smart enough to only drink water as a host of local bands raged out with a wide assortment of heavy metal. There was a neo-thrash three-piece, a New York-style death metal quartet with hammering breakdowns, and a melodic, pseudo-NWOBHM band called Black Temple who were actually quite good.

I have to be frank with you, though. I didn’t pay my usual level of attention to the music that night. A pretty young thing in black with tattoos

kept making eye contact with me. Her quick look-aways convinced me that I had a chance. It had been a long while since anything exciting had happened in my personal life, and I was still drunk enough to do anything. So, accordingly, I made my move while the second band was transitioning into the third.

She was wearing a 1349 t-shirt—a definite black metal fan. In fact, that's what she opened the conversation with: "Not as bad as normal in here. Still, it's too much party metal for me, you know? All beers, buds, and getting bitches."

"Would you like something a little more kvlt? How about suicidal-depressive?"

"Haha, you're an asshole. For your information, I am only here to support my friend Ollie. He's the drummer for Black Temple."

"That's cool. I like live music—that's why I am here."

"I prefer listening at home. That's why I love Bathory, Burzum, Count Gríma, and other shit like that. They never played live, so listening to them in isolation is kinda the point."

"Wait, you like Count Gríma?"

It was a bad move, for Helen (as I soon found out) was enthusiastic enough and hot enough to get me to open up about what I was working on. I began to regret my decision almost instantly, but by the time Helen invited me back to her place to listen to some Count Gríma, the damage was done.

For the majority of our thirty minute walk back to Helen's Williamsburg apartment, she kept her eyes stuck on her cell phone screen, just texting away. I tried to ply a little small talk, but it went down like a lead zeppelin. Helen didn't look me in the eyes until we got to her door when she felt required say "thank you" when I held the door open for her. We spent an hour in the living room listening to Forever Against the Dawn before she asked me if I wanted to hear "Suffocato Clamoribus." I had to suppress a hard-on. Here it was—my golden chalice.

She put the tape in the stereo. I craned my neck and perked up my ears. The song, which is over an hour long, begins immediately with a moody electric piano that was added during the mixing process. The screams don't start until the six minute mark or thereabouts, which corresponded with the time that I realized that I hadn't yet asked Helen about where she had found the tape in the first place.

“I used to sell drugs to this guy named Rich. He was a total tweeker who couldn’t keep a job, so he used to pay me with a lot of weird shit. Once, when he was really high, he offered to give me this tape for about two grams of hash. I wasn’t into Count Gríma at the time, so I didn’t accept it at first. I called him a bastard, a junkie, and an old motherfucker. He promised me that this tape was valuable, and you know what? He’s right: this tape has been keeping me and my friends paid for a while now.”

“Rich Sullivan?”

“I don’t know his fucking name, man. He was just Rich the Stoner.”

“Hunh. I heard once that some writer for Vice had this tape.”

“Alpha!? That kooky bitch borrowed it for a while. I just got it back a few days ago. I practically had to force her to give it back to me.”

“Is ‘force’ too weak of a word?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

There came two knocks on the door. Helen just said “yeah” and two agitated dudes came in. The first one was a smallish guy in a zip-up hoodie. He was wearing his hood up, and he was holding a baseball bat. The other guy, a tall drink of pale water who looked sleepless, was carrying duct tape. I knew I was in some serious trouble even before the bat put me into oblivion.

I woke up in the same room, except this time I was in a chair—taped to it actually. The sun was up, but it was the type of sun that was weak enough to remind you that it is barely morning. My head hurt like hell, and I immediately vomited all over myself. That made my captors laugh—all two of them. Helen was nowhere in sight.

“Morning, pony boy. I hope you have access to a laundry mat, ’cause you just made a mess.”

“Why…oh damn it…why are you doing this?”

“You didn’t stop sniffin’, so me and Brian came here to make sure that we put your snoopin’ nose out of commission.”

“Jesus, man. What did I do? Is this about the whole Gríma thing? Did you guys kill Alpha?”

“Yes on both counts. You’re pretty smart for a dumbass. You see, you and her are two nosey ass people. You guys tried to ruin our little operation. We don’t like that, so here you are.”

“Dude, I will tell you anything. I’ll stop looking for Gríma’s journals and the tape. I swear on my mother’s grave.”

“Who are you working for?”

“A magazine…Sonic Sounds.”

“That dubstep magazine? That thing sucks. Is that it?”

I thought about giving them his name, but I remembered I never got his name. I didn’t know who the bald man who looked like Viktor Shklovsky was. My ignorance then was not artificial.

“Was this your idea or someone else’s?”

“It was mine, all mine.”

“I have a feelin’ that you’re lyin’. That’s not a smart move. It doesn’t matter in the end, though; we are still goin’ to do this to you.”

“Oh shit. Do what?”

“Helen is in the bathroom right now. She’s cookin’ up a little stew for you.”

Helen came out of the bathroom with a role of gauze that looked old and used. It smelled terrible. Brian, the tall, skinny one, stuffed a sock in my mouth and taped it around my head as Helen began to wrap the sticky and nauseous gauze around my eyes. The other member of the crew, the chatty one with the hoodie, kept glaring at me the whole time as he spoke.

“Here’s the thing: you are a paid eye for the guys we’ve been blackmailin’ for months now. Those boys will do anythin’ to get their hands on the Gríma swag we got. I don’t know how much they told you about themselves, but your bosses are some goofy wizards who want that tape for some ceremony or somethin’. They already have some of the journals, or at least we think they do. The journals weren’t there when we went back to Rich the Stoner’s place. Rich was dead of course—a knife was stickin’ out his chewed-through throat. That’s where we got the M.O. from; that’s why we killed that loudmouth Alpha like we did.”

Helen wrapped the gauze tight around my head. I was thankful for the sock—it kept the yellowish liquid on the gauze from running into my mouth.

“I’ll wager that you’re wonderin’ what’s on that gauze that you’re wearing. It’s my pleasure to tell you that it’s Helen’s. It’s gross to say, but our friend Helen here is a bit of a slut. Now, don’t be alarmed—she calls herself that, too. Anyway, Helen’s love for the male member is a little too strong, and we all know from health class that that has some consequences. Your eyes are now coated with that consequence, a consequence called gonorrhea. Enjoy.”

I started screaming furiously. I twisted and headbanged in an attempt to get the wicked bandage off of my face. No such luck. When I figured that out, I started trying to be so loud that someone else in the building would hear. I stomped my loosely-tied feet, and I even managed to knock the chair over. My plan ended when they hit me with the bat again.

The second time I woke up was in a dumpster. I didn't know if it was the same day or not. I was beyond sick, and my eyes were burning. I was terrified of going blind, which meant I instinctively put my hands to my eyes like old King Oedipus. The gauze was still there, so I tore it off furiously. When I opened my eyes I saw my way out of the dumpster. I was less than a block away from my apartment, so I ran home. A vomit-covered man with inflamed eyes ran home in midday Brooklyn: that was my headline.

I got home and threw my face into the sink. I rubbed soap and alcohol into my eyes too many times to count. I cried a lot, and I puked again, this time in the comfort of my own toilet. I was naked for most of the entire day. I took three showers. I called Derek to let him know that I needed a break, and that I was terribly sick; too sick to write for him anymore. He told me to get better. I thanked him weakly, and then I went back to crying and drinking.

The next day I wrote a detailed letter to the Upper East Side address. I told him everything. I put a stamp on it and mailed it out. I stayed in my apartment for three more days. I didn't talk to anyone.

When I came home after my first night out of the house and the day before my mom's doctor took a look at my eyes, I got a letter. It was from the Upper East Side address and it went like this:

Mr. Sacco,

I cannot thank you enough for all of your work on our behalf. I am terribly sorry about your awful ordeal, and I hope the check that I have attached to this letter will aid you and improve your health. I would like you to know that your descriptive letter helped us to locate those three criminals who did that unspeakable thing to you. I can assure you that they have been dealt with.

Finally, I would like to let you know that we have in our possession "Suffocato Clamoribus" and we plan on using it very soon. I would offer you a listen at my house, but I am leaving soon for West Virginia. Again, we

would like to thank you for all you have done. I hope your article is a smashing success.

It was not signed.

About: *Benjamin Welton*

Benjamin Welton is a music critic, fiction writer, poet, and academic currently living in Burlington, Vermont. He has written for *Seven Days, Crime Magazine, InYourSpeakers, Vantage Point, Schlock!,* and *Ravenous Monster*. He can be contacted at benjaminwltn@gmail.com

SWAN SONG OF ROBERT ENSLIN

By

Matt Hayward

Review taken from "Like It Loud" magazine, January 1996:

"The most recent offering from Pennsylvania-based Slow Grind is their twelve track independently-released studio album "State Of Mind". A triumph of modern rock laced with blues, this monster of an album is guaranteed to turn some heads on the live circuit. Built upon a thunderous, tight rhythm section composed of DeLong brothers Andy and Sam, this album does not let up from start to finish - and while stand-out tracks such as 'Pushed Too Far' see vocalist Gary Richardson soar up the octaves with his whiskey-ridden voice, the real treat on this juggernaut is hearing guitarist Robert Enslin rip out a solo or two. Although staying primarily in the (what one would think as) predictably stale minor pentatonic, Enslin manages to put a jaw-dropping twist on such an old thing that you need to hear it to believe it. You can catch the guys live at Jacob's Bar & Lounge this Saturday the ..."

Rob lowered the magazine from his face and looked to Gary.

"God damn it," he laughed. "If only these good reviews reflected our financial state, huh?"

Gary smirked and nodded in agreement. "Same shit, different day, man. Same shit, different day."

They had been driving for a little over an hour now, speeding down the highway on their way to the last show of the week. The radio in the old van (a present from Gary's dad when they put out their debut release) was bust, and only the sound of an occasional car whizzing by in the opposite direction punched at the silence.

"Got to stop doing these freebies, dude," Gary added, eyes not leaving the road. "At least if we can manage to flog a few copies of State Of Mind we'll just about cover our gas. If we're lucky."

They pulled into Jacob's just as it started to rain, the van's heavy tires splashing through a black puddle as they parked. With the engine off and ticking as it cooled, there was only the sound of heavy rain tapping the rooftop.

Sam and Andy put their jackets over their heads and ran inside to the bar to ask if there was a back entrance so they could unload the equipment, while Gary and Rob sat in silence watching the raindrops race down the outside of the windshield.

It reminded Rob of waiting for his mom to come back out from the store with their weekly groceries when he was a kid. They sat for a while in that comfortable silence only longtime friends are capable of.

"Another line of shows down..." Gary said, while opening his door. "Well dude, let's rock and roll."

On stage little over an hour later and plugging into his Marshall stack for the third time this week, all the burdens of everyday life melted away like a snow under blistering heat. A smirk spread across Rob's face as he swelled the volume knob on his guitar and felt the speaker's air rush over him from behind.

He smiled at Andy to his left and eyed him a wink. *This* was where he belonged, all of them, on stage. He was *born* to do this, had known it from the very first time he picked up his dad's old parlor acoustic in the attic when he was just twelve years old.

He, Gary and the DeLong brothers all belonged here. It was in their collective blood and they knew that they were powerless to do anything about it. You either had it or you didn't, and boy did they have it. It was all or nothing when it came to a full time band.

The stage lights lifted, blinding him, and he basked in their neon glow, eyes shut. The unseen crowd cheered, and as it grew and washed over him, a chuckle rose to his lips again. *Home*.

Sam clacked the drumsticks from behind, counting them into 'Pushed Too Far', the lead single of the new release. From there, and for the next hour, the four friends were in a world of their own. A world they had created together. A place where they could momentarily transcend the troubles of this world, for no matter how short a time that may be.

After the show, Gary said he'd pull the van into the alleyway around back while Andy, Sam and Rob packed up their gear.

They thanked the odd crowd member who wandered up to the stage for a kind word. Rob hated to meet and greet after shows, it felt somehow silly and undeserved and it made it him nervous, but his cables were always tangled into a Chinese knot and it usually took him the better part of ten minutes to get it sorted.

"Fucking *sweeeet* playing!" the latest drunken crowd member to approach the stage shouted while pointing at Rob. Spittle flew from his mouth. "*Dananananana*!"

Now he was playing air guitar while swinging his head around, still pointing. *Great,* Rob thought, *not awkward at all.* He politely smiled and nodded to the man, all the while making his way around him towards the back door. His smile dropped as soon as he had his back to him. He caught up to Sam and Andy at the fire exit door, chuckling.

"Could do without *that* almost every show, huh?" Sam winked at him. "Oh well," he sighed, "that's the price you pay for being a rock star, eh Robbie?"

The brothers clapped him on the back and they stepped out into the heavy rain. The cold air rushed to meet them and it felt wonderful on Rob's sweat-slicked skin. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, greeting every drop with a satisfied groan. Gary climbed out of the van ahead of them and banged the door closed behind him.

"Alright, let's get it loaded, ladies," he called, tossing the keys from one hand to the other while strolling towards them. "Nice turnout tonight. Shame we only got two albums sold. At least that covers our fuel, though."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, grunting from the side of his mouth while lighting a cigarette. "Not a bad show at all." He blew smoke from his nostrils, making him look momentarily like a cartoon angry bull. As they stood in silence waiting for Sam to finish his cigarette, someone spoke up from down the alley.

"No, not a bad show at all, little dude."

The four of them turned to see who had spoken. The silhouette of a skinny man with long hair was visible in the mouth of the alley. His shadow elongated and fell behind him from the main street's light as he approached.

He had a happy 'hippy' stride about him, head bopping as he slowly strolled forward. Coming into the light, completely hidden beneath his long grey beard was a large smile. One that you could usually associate with

those who are stoned. A smile the band were familiar with. The ‘crow’s feet’ around his eyes gave him away.

His boot heels clicked pleasantly on the blacktop as he strode forward; he carried a battered brown guitar case in his left hand.

When he reached the boys, he clasped a hand on Robby’s shoulder and puffed a little laugh through his nostrils, bobbing his head.

“Mean guitar playing, man.” He sounded to Robby like that actor Tommy Chong. Looked very similar too, with his John Lennon style glasses.

“Got a lot to talk about, little dude.” His smile grew impossibly wider across that weathered face. “You and I got a lot to talk about.”

“Hey, no disrespect, but if it’s got anything to do with the band, you can talk to all four of us,” Gary spoke up, regarding the man suspiciously.

“Oh don’t worry, Paul Rodgers,” the old man cried out in good humor, they all laughed at that. Gary was used to the comparison by this stage. “Ain’t gonna steal your boy. Nothin’ like that. Just want an old chinwag with yours truly here, that’s all. Care for a drink, man?” He gave Robert’s shoulder a little squeeze.

“Yeah, sure.” Robby laughed, his left eyebrow was arched up in that amused expression his friends knew well, in what they called a ‘Robby face.’ “Why the hell not.”

“Alright then.” The old man put his free hand on the fire door and pushed it open, squeezing himself past the DeLong brothers and through into the venue.

“When you’re ready I’ll be at the bar,” he shouted back just before the door closed. Its slam echoed down the alley.

Rob looked to Gary, Adam and Sam with his ‘Robby face’ still on, looking for an answer.

“Go on, dude.” Adam laughed. “At least it will be an interesting story in our biography if you’re murdered.”

They shook hands and parted ways, the DeLong brothers taking a lift with Gary while Robert went back inside to the bar to talk with the old man.

The venue was mostly empty by then, some hangers on, but since it was nearly one a.m., it was pretty quiet. Rob took a seat next to him at the bar. The stool squeaked as he plopped his weight down onto it.

“So what’s your name, man?” Robert asked while extending his hand for a shake. The old man shook firmly; his palm felt dry and calloused.

“I’ve been called many a name back in my day, little Robby, dude. But you can call me Frank, Frank Carpenter at your service, son.”

They both smiled comfortably at that, as if old acquaintances. Frank must have been a fan of the band to know his name; it was nice to know their only fan demographic wasn’t the drunken college type. The Rolling Stones droned quietly in the background on the jukebox.

“So, Frank,” Robert said while pointing to the case leaning at Frank’s side. “What’s in the case? I take it you play?”

He’d been eyeballing the old brown leather guitar hard case ever since setting eyes on Frank. In fact, thinking back, he’d seen the hard case first. Frank cast his gaze to the case and then back up to Rob.

“We’ll get to that soon, little brother. But first of all - what’s your poison?”

Robert took no time in replying. “Tequila, on the rocks.”

Frank’s bushy eyebrows raised in amusement. “Tequila time, eh? The Devil’s water. I like your style already.”

He turned to the bartender, raising his index and middle finger indicating two drinks.

“You can play a mean guitar, dude, and I know a good player when I see one. You don’t just *masturbate the neck* if you catch my drift. Guitar is all about the *feel*, don’t you ever forget that.” He cocked a thumb towards the jukebox.

“Richards, man… Keith Richards can play with feel. Dude can really riff.”

Robbie nodded in agreement. He had always been a Stones fan for as far back as he could remember.

“I met him once,” Frank continued. “Back in ’65 on their first US tour. Nice guy.”

“No way?” Robbie was amazed. “You’re kidding, right? I’d give my left nut just to jam with Richards.”

“Yeah, a lot of people would give away a lot of things to go further in this business, am I right?” Frank’s lined, droopy face regarded Rob for an answer.

“Fuckin’ A man. Fuckin’ A.” Rob nodded in agreement.

The two shots of tequila were placed in front of them and Robbie downed his as quickly as it arrived, slamming the glass back down onto the bar. It burned a good burn as it traveled to his stomach, making his eyes

water a little. Frank raised his index finger to the barman, indicating a second shot for Rob. He then patted the brown leather guitar case.

"I got a 1957 Gibson Les Paul gold top in this here case."

Frank looked Robbie straight in the eye after he spoke, waiting for him to react.

"Are you serious?" Robbie acted shocked but in truth, he had been expecting something as old and extravagant from the look of Frank.

"I've always dreamed of owning a vintage Les Paul, but we didn't make as much money off the first record as I had hoped, so I guess I'll just keep on dreaming on. You're a lucky man, Frankie. A very lucky man."

"Nah," Frank rasped, waving his hand dismissively. "Ain't nothing lucky about it, son. I had some money back then and I wanted one, so I bought it, and I played it. Not professionally mind you, just for fun. Always been a huge music fan, not a music player. Just never had the commitment. No *luck* involved. Now if you want to talk about luck, then how about we talk about yours?"

Frank lifted his shot glass to his beard and sipped a small taste of the amber liquid. He licked his lips and then swallowed the whole thing slowly, placing the glass gently back on the table when he finished.

"What are you talking about?" Robbie laughed.

"It's yours if you want it, kid," Frank said, matter-of-factly.

"What? ... I couldn't take it, Mr. Carpenter, sir." Just as he said the words he realized how out of character it seemed. Frank laughed.

"Mr. Carpenter, sir?" he said in mock imitation. "Robbie, I'm a dude, a Frank, but never a mister and certainly *never-a-sir*. Let's get that straight, man."

Robert lowered his head, embarrassed.

"Sorry, Frank. I mean it just wouldn't feel right, man, taking a guitar. And it's not just any guitar either, I mean, a proper vintage gold top." He paused and then added sheepishly, "From a stranger, at that. Why not just sell it if you don't want it anymore?"

Frank looked him in the eye.

"Because the only type of person who could afford this baby would be a collector. Do you know what a collector would do to it?" Frank asked.

"What?" Rob asked, but he already knew the answer.

"He'd put it in a glass case or something and it would never get played, man. You and I both know that. I'm not going to live forever, and

my hands are seizing up in recent years. I'm sure you'll find out all about it someday yourself, but if by giving it to you means it will still get to sing; well then, I think you owe it to the old girl to make her sing."

"You're serious, aren't you?" Robbie was dumbfounded. His heart smacked against his ribcage, and his breath came in short, shallow bursts.

"You're damn right I am, little dude. You're damn right I am."

Frank's face blurred a little as tears dampened Robbie's cheeks. He sniffled and wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. He was surprised to see his hand was shaking.

"I…" He tried to speak but his voice was barely a whisper. He cleared his throat and tried again.

"Thank you… God, that sounds so ungrateful for what I really mean, man. Thank you a million times over; I honestly don't know what to say. I feel like I've just won the lottery." He looked the old man in the face. "Is there any way I can repay you if you're serious about this?"

He caught the tequila out of the corner of his stinging eyes and quickly snatched it up with his shaking hand, getting it down quick and placing it back onto the bar. It spun as it landed, hitting the bar's marble top three times.

"Ah dude, don't *cry*!" Frank said mockingly. After a short break of silence, he brought his hands slowly over his head like someone imitating a ghost and twinkled his fingers.

"You could give me your soul, Robbie, man?"

They both laughed hard at that, Robert louder than he expected to. The couple at the end of the bar looked at them disapprovingly, making Robert laugh harder.

"If that's what you want, you got it, Frankie my man," he said, his sniffles dying down a little. "I'll give you my damn soul for this here guitar."

"Let's get it in writing then, huh?"

Still laughing, Frankie stood up, fished out a pen from his jeans pocket and swiped the tequila receipt from the bar, handed them both to Robert. Robbie chuckled as he took them.

"If this will make you happy, dude."

He read aloud as he began to write:

"I give one unused and still sealed in the box soul, to Frank Carpenter in return for his 1957 Gibson Les Paul gold top – Robert Enslin."

He dotted the final period with a firm thud of the pen on the bar and handed the piece of paper to Frank with a smile.

"Here's your receipt, mister never-a-sir."

Frank took it, folded it and stuffed it in his jeans pocket along with the pen. He then bent down and closed his fist around the leather handle of the guitar case. The old leather creaked as he lifted it and placed it on the surface of the bar with a grunt of effort. The couple at the end of the bar looked to them again, this time with curiosity.

Frank spread his arms over the case.

"Go ahead," he said, readjusting comfortably back into his chair.

Robert had a moment of worry that Gary or one of the DeLongs had put him up to this, that there would be nothing inside. The bar would explode with laughter and he'd hightail it out of there, embarrassed beyond belief.

Putting aside the thought, he snapped open the four golden locks running along the case's edge and opened it slowly. The purple plush interior greeted him warmly. He slipped away the purple silk cloth covering the guitar itself and then there it was. It was not a joke.

A golden, well-worn 1957 Les Paul lay sleeping. The lacquered finish had been completely stripped away in parts, revealing the dark mahogany of the body underneath. In the bar's dim light it was a beautiful sight to behold. His eyes stung and he realized he hadn't been blinking. He continued to stare bewildered until Frank snapped him out of his trance.

"She's a beauty, huh? Got character too, that's for sure."

Rob reached in and took it out slowly by the neck. The weight felt wonderful in his arms, like an old friend and at the same time as natural as an extra limb. He turned it over to inspect the back.

A golden-brown mahogany made up the neck and back of the body, completely stripped back from its bare finish in parts. Its silver-plated hardware was rusted and dulled from its years of use. *Character*, Rob thought.

"If you're serious, Frank, I hope I never get that receipt back," he said. His eyes never left the guitar.

"Don't worry, little dude, this is for keeps."

Review taken from "Bulldozer" magazine, October 1999:

"Released posthumously one month after vocalist Gary Richardson's untimely death at the age of twenty-seven, Slow Grind's third studio effort 'All Or Nothing' places them at the top of the charts for the third consecutive week. The album went gold when…

Rob read this review from '99 every year for the past six - on Gary's anniversary.

It was still hard to believe he was gone. The royalties from their back catalogue had kept him afloat and with the upcoming re-mastered edition of their debut album, he always knew he'd be on top financially.

Being on top mentally was another story. The band had never known of Gary's heroin vice, had never suspected a thing. The only drug they ever took together (this was even before they formed Slow Grind, and very rarely) was acid. Now, annually on Gary's anniversary as if a ritual, Robbie took a trip for his lost buddy. This year was no exception.

"Here's to you, Gar," Rob slurred as he raised his glass of raw whiskey (not on the rocks, just like Gary always had it) and slipped the blotter of acid onto his tongue. He washed it down with the burn of the liquor. The liquid sloshed up the bottle, and he swallowed what he managed to get to his mouth.

He reached to his left where the old '57 Les Paul gold top sat on a stand. Not *his* gold top, *the* gold top. It never felt like his, even after all these years.

He strummed a bluesy melody, stopping every so often to think. He played and thought of days gone, feet cross-legged under him, for about an hour. After that he slept, curled up on the floor in the fetal position with the guitar as a teddy bear.

He thought he dreamt someone in his living room, placing a record on his record player and powering it on. The noises were all too vivid. The slow hiss and crackle of the record turning drifted up to where he lay.

He creaked open his throbbing eyes some hours later to the carpet against his left cheek. It smelt musty, a smell that matched his current state of mind. It was dark out by then. The only light that was coming in was from the hallway light outside the small spare bedroom.

He took a deep inhale and sat himself up. His head ached. The acid was well in affect at least - there was someone walking up the hallway and Rob could see the shadow of their head bobbing. *Him*. Rob knew this

instantly. He had been thinking of Frank far too much lately and had a feeling the old man would somehow work his way into his trip.

Frank's boot heels stopped clicking just outside the door, his shadow elongated on the spare room's wall via the tiny sliver of light creeping into the room. Rob heard him puff a light chuckle and then catch it, one that indicated he was holding back a bigger laugh.

"*Duuuuude,*" Frank wailed, imitating a ghost from outside the door. They both burst into laughter, Robbie with his legs crossed as if he were a child watching a puppet show. He clasped his hands loudly and snorted a laugh, rocking back and forth.

The room fell silent. Only the sound of their anxious breathing, awaiting what was next, could be heard. Frank's shadow brought its hands above its head slowly, imitating a ghost just as the old man had done at the bar.

"*Maaaaan,*" Frank howled next while twinkling his fingers. It sent them both into a fresh fit of laughter. After a moment's thought, Robbie lay on his back with the guitar lying across his stomach. His laughter died down to a chuckle and he began to strum absentmindedly.

He knew why Frank was here.

"So you've come for it?" Robbie asked while looking at the ceiling, more a statement than a question.

"You said it was mine, little dude, and a deal's a deal, ain't it?" Frank asked while his old wrinkled hand crept around the doorframe. Frank entered the room. He walked over and stood at Robbie's feet, looking down on him, towering over him.

He looked the very same as the day they had met. A smile still lay beneath that bushy white beard. His head still bopped to unheard music, only this time, there *was* music. It took Robbie a moment to realize, but he could hear it now.

It grew louder from the speakers in the living room. It was a wash of what Robbie knew as tritones, layered over feedback. Dissonant and slow.

"What is it?" Robbie asked quietly, eyes still on the ceiling.

"It's your swan song, Robbie, man. Your very own song," Frank said slowly, his head tilted to the side, regarding Rob as a puppy would. "You like it?"

"Yeah... I really do," Robert said after a moment. He meant it too. A deal *was* a deal. A gold record and three consecutively well-received

albums was a lot to accomplish in his twenty-seven short years, and if this happened to be the price, well, thinking about it, he wouldn't change a thing.

He felt bad about Gar though. Always had. But sacrifices had to be made to get to where they got to together. And he was fine with that. After all, it was all or nothing - and Robert had given it all.

Frank's smile grew impossibly wider, his features distorting with the dim light. The music swelled to an unbearable volume but Robbie just closed his eyes and got lost in a new world, a world of his own music.

About: *Matt Hayward*

Matt Hayward is an Irish, Dublin-based musician (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matt_Hayward) and writer. After some words of encouragement from friend Kim Paffenroth to attempt fiction, over the last few years he has written a copious number of short stories and started two novels, due for completion later this year.

THE BLUE-EYED DEAL

By

Greg McWhorter

Lincoln Douglas Brown was sick and tired of the sharecropper's life and even though he was only fourteen, he dreamed of leaving it all behind. He sat on the edge of a little creek with his overall pant legs rolled up, and dipped his feet in the cool water. It was a beautiful summer day in West Point, Mississippi, but all Lincoln could think about was what he had heard last night. Apparently his Uncle Chester had moved to Chicago and was making it big as a blues musician. Lincoln heard all about bluesmen. They got all the booze, women, money, and gambling that they could stand and more. They drove fancy cars and never had to work their family farms anymore. They bathed in whisky and burned hundred-dollar bills for cigarettes. Lincoln thought he could easily get accustomed to that life and would give anything to be the best guitar player. He never thought things out very well and never once thought about practicing more, for instance.

"Lincoln Douglas Brown! Where are you, boy? You got work to finish!" He heard his mother yell at him from across the fields. He knew he still had a few acres left to pick, so grudgingly he left the cool of the creek and trudged back to the heat of the open fields and the flies that bit him. He thought about running away, but he knew that he didn't know how to play guitar well enough yet. It was only on his last birthday that he received the hand-me-down guitar and he still could not play it well at all. As he picked vegetables and placed them into baskets, he tried to think of some way that he could get to be a great guitar player right away. His family and friends had all told him that he would only get good through many hours of practice, but he didn't have time for that. Why didn't they all realize that he needed to become famous now so that he could enjoy it longer instead of being old by the time it happened?

After he finished his picking and his dinner, he grabbed his guitar from his bedroom and walked over to the little rundown barn on their property. This is where he usually practiced, whenever he got around to it. His family had made him practice in the barn since he sounded terrible and

the walls were so thin in the house. He slumped on a hay bale and started plucking away, dreaming of fame and fortune to be had in the music business. He thought of all the bluesmen he had heard about, including Robert Johnson. His mammy wouldn't let him listen to Johnson because supposedly he had made a deal with the Devil himself and that is how he got so popular. If only the Devil would help me out, he thought to himself as he tried to strum.

"I could help you, my boy, in exchange for something small."

Lincoln looked up and was startled to see a white man with shocking blue eyes and blond hair standing in front of him. This man was dressed in a fine white suit like he was ready for church. Lincoln dropped his jaw at the sight and almost dropped his guitar too. He fumbled to right himself, and asked the man, "What you want 'round here, Mister?"

"I am here to help you."

"How you do that, Mister?"

"I know what you desire and I can make it happen."

Lincoln thought to himself that this must be the Devil. He had heard his folks refer to white people as 'Blue-Eyed Devils' and maybe it was because the Devil looked this way himself.

"Oh, I can look anyway you like. I can read your thoughts, you know. Like when you thought how you would give anything to be the best guitar player. Yes, I am the Devil and I can grant your wish, just like I did for Robert Johnson."

That hooked little Lincoln. He thought about the famous bluesman and everything that could be his; the riches, the women, and so on.

"Lincoln, all you have to do is tell me what you want and agree to give me your soul in exchange for your granted wish. It is very easy and simple."

"Okay, Mister Devil, Sir. I want to be the best guitar player in the world!"

"And what do I get for granting you this wish?"

"Anything…you kin have my soul!" Lincoln never listened much at church and figured that something he could not see could not be very important anyway. Besides, with all that fame would bring him, he would be living the grand life for a long time and his soul would never do much for him.

"Thank you, Lincoln. Your wish is granted."

Lincoln did not feel any different. “What I do now, Mister Devil?”

“Play me a song, Lincoln.”

Lincoln looked down at his guitar and tried to pluck something out. To his amazement he started playing beautifully. He played rhythms and leads that were decades beyond his previous talent. He played a whole song with tears of happiness rolling down his cheeks and a smile upon his face. When he finished the song he looked up at the Devil and smiled.

That is when he had a major heart attack and his body fell over the hay bale, dead. The Devil made a gesture and a thin thing like a gossamer web flew out of the boy’s mouth and came to him. He expanded the thing until it resembled Lincoln and it screamed out; “That’s not fair! You were supposed to grant my wish!”

The Devil smiled upon the thing that was once a part of Lincoln and said, “I don’t play fair, but I did grant your wish. While you played me that song, you were the best guitar player in the world. You just didn’t specify how long you wanted your talent to last.” With that the Devil wadded the web-like thing between his hands as it screamed and screamed and rolled it up into a little ball and popped it in his mouth. The Devil sighed in contentment and left the barn to find his next soul.

WITCHBONE

By

Greg McWhorter

At the moment, Deathstalker was the hottest band in Salem, Massachusetts. The underground black metal scene was small, but passionate. Malefice Orator, Mal for short, was known for his thrash screams and growls. As lead vocalists go for this type of music, he was one of the best. Deathstalker had only been around for the last two years, but they had made quite a name for themselves with the local press when two fans stabbed each other to death during a basement show. Of course, the press blamed the band's lyrics and made up all kinds of nonsense about how demonic the band was. In fact, local churches started up all the propaganda against the burgeoning black metal scene, just like they had decades ago for heavy metal and punk. For those that remembered the past, this was seen as completely laughable, yet it was effective amongst the more gullible citizens. Parents forbade their teenagers from going to Deathstalker shows, which caused attendance to actually increase.

Mal wanted to capitalize on the press as much as possible. He had friends do photo shoots with the band covered in blood, holding baby dolls and other such shocking things. The negative exposure in the media and church groups sent downloads of the band's lone demo into the thousands. Mal and his bandmates realized right away that although good press helps, bad press helps even more. As the band prepared for a mini-tour of the east coast of North America, they knew they must have some gimmick to push them over the top with their fans.

It was Sacrilege, the bass player - known as 'Sac' for short, who proposed a great idea. "Look, we need something big that'll help us to really stand out, but we also have to be careful. We need something for the shows that'll show our fans just how deep we are about our music without getting the cops down on us, right? We live in Massachusetts, and it has a long history of witchcraft. What if we dig up the bones of an old witch and use them as part of our stage display?" He said this as he looked from band member to band member.

“The last thing we need is to get in trouble for being grave robbers, Sac! Get real, man!” It was Mal who had spoken up angrily against the idea.

Sac continued calmly. “No. The witches have been dead for hundreds of years. Many of the places where they’re buried are disused and forgotten. If we plan this carefully, we should be able to dig up some old witch bones with no one knowing a thing. Of course, we spread this to all of our fans through word of mouth. We can’t risk mentioning it on the internet or anything stupid like that. Our fans know what real bones look like. Once they see the display with the witch bones at our show, they’ll know that we are serious. Besides, the witches have been dead for so long that I doubt we can even get in trouble.”

The band argued this entire situation over for a while and discussed various angles before deciding to go ahead with the plan, provided that a proper location was found.

After a short week of the members visiting various old cemeteries and old churchyards, one was found that was perfect. The small brick church was in ruins and only walls remained. The roof had caved in ages ago and all doors and fixtures were rotted or completely absent. The fields all around were covered in weeds and growth almost as tall as the band members. Gravestones still stood upright in many places and proved to almost be a tripping hazard to the band as they walked around. Each member had their cell phones out and they were searching names on tombstones to see if any of them were connected to witches of the past. It was Mal who found a name that fit with the Salem Witch Trials. He read; Sarah Good, B: July 11, 1653 – D: July 19, 1692. That was all that was on the stone, but an internet search on his cell phone revealed that Sarah Good was one of three witches that had been accused of witchcraft in the earliest known case in Salem. He excitedly shared the information with the band and it was decided to come back during the night to ensure that no one would see them digging up her mortal remains.

Since the old churchyard was already fairly devoid of neighbors, they only waited until it was dark enough to proceed instead of waiting for midnight, the witching hour. It was just after nine when they had dug deep enough and hit the soft, splintering wood of an old coffin. It was Mal, always the adventurer, who jumped into the hole. Luckily he had on a tough pair of combat boots as he crashed through the rotted coffin. Even with his

feet and lower legs now inside, he managed to keep his balance and broke open the top part. The decayed wood easily broke apart in his hands and before long he was staring into the eternal blackness of the eye holes of the skull that had belonged to one of Salem's witches, Sarah Good. The skull was at an odd angle to the neck…he remembered from his searching online that she had been hanged so he knew this must be her. All was silent in the night as he reached down and plucked the skull from its resting place and held it up for the band to see. In apparent awe, not a word was spoken as Sac grabbed the skull from Mal and placed it into an awaiting backpack. The rest of the band helped Mal out of the grave and proceeded to kick dirt into the hole.

The next evening was band practice. Everyone arrived at the old icehouse that had been converted into practice studios and started setting up. Sac's backpack had been brought here the night before and reposed against one wall. A few of the band's friends had brought some wood, screws, hinges, and various tools to erect some kind of stage display as the band practiced for their upcoming tour.

One of the friends nagged the band between songs; "Man, you guys should have brought the entire skeleton. We could've really made something cool with the whole thing. We could've had it hanging in a recreation of how she died or something. Man, the skull is cool and all, but the whole skeleton would've been awesome!" The truth was that the band was in such awe of their accomplishment in obtaining the skull, they didn't think to get the rest of the corpse. Annoyed, Mal yelled back; "Just fucking make do, and leave us the fuck alone!"

The band practiced every song they knew several times, making sure that they were perfect. They wanted to kill their audience with their sonic blasts of metalized thrash riffing and growling. It was important that their music be as good as the negative hype had made the band seem in the minds of black metal fans. They had to be great. During the whole practice, the band's friends had erected a collapsible framework of black silk sheets, wrapped in barbed wire. On the edges they created what sort of resembled giant skeletal claws, reaching out to where the audience would be. At the top, in the middle of the framework, was a small wooden shelf that was painted red. The band was asked to produce the skull and place it on the shelf. Mal took the skull out of the backpack and placed it on the bright red shelf above the band. To make it look even more impressive, one of the

builders of the framework placed a crown of thorns, made out of more barbed wire around the skull, and poured some fake blood on top in a dripping effect.

"That looks stupid! Fake blood and old barbed wire…This is the best you guys could come up with? Fuck! We're gonna look like idiots!" Mal yelled at the builders as everyone examined the stage prop. The band members all agreed, but the tour was to start the day after tomorrow so they uneasily resigned themselves to the prop. "Shit, after all that effort to get that damn skull, we might as well use it somehow," said Sac out loud, sharing the feelings of every member. The band packed up their gear as the builders collapsed the framework prop. The skull went back into the backpack and everything was left behind and locked up at the practice studio as everyone made their way toward their homes for the night.

Sac was awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of wailing sirens passing his house. At first he paid them little attention as he tried to get back to sleep, but all of the sirens and lights going by finally roused him to the point that he ventured a peek out of his window. He saw police cars and ambulances all over the street just one block over. His drummer lived over that way. It was only one in the morning, maybe he was still up. He called on his cell phone three times with no response. While he was calling, Sac noticed that more emergency vehicles were speeding across town. He mumbled out loud; "What the hell is going on?" He decided to call his guitar player, who was the closest to his drummer.

"Hey, Crank? Glad you're still up. Hey man, there are a ton of cops and ambulances over by Butch's house. Have you heard from him tonight?"

"No. He went straight home after practice tonight. Said he was tired and his mom was gonna cook somethin' good tonight. Hold on…someone's knocking on my door."

Sac held the line as he heard Crank's movements.

"Sac? I think Butch is here." Unknown to Sac, Crank looked out of the spy-hole in the door and saw Butch's face looking back at him.

"It is Butch, but he looks like shit. Hold on while I let him in." On the other end, Sac heard the noise of a chain lock sliding off its catch and a door opening. He heard Crank's greeting. "My man Butch! What's the…Oh shit! Oh fuck! No!" All Sac heard after that was a scream and what sounded like something falling hard on the floor. Sac called out several times over his cell phone before hanging up.

Not knowing what else to do, he called Mal and explained all of the strange commotion and the call to Crank. Sac had woken up Mal, who had been having bad dreams and was glad to be awakened.

"Look Sac, since you're already up, maybe you should just take a walk to the next block and see what is going on. I'll get dressed and we can meet up at Crank's. Call me when you get to Butch's place, okay?"

"Okay, Mal." Sac hung up and left his house. He walked down to the end of his block and turned left toward the next block where Butch lived. As he turned the corner, he immediately saw that the emergency activity was centered in front of his drummer's home. He ran over and was stopped just in front of the house by 'Police – Do Not Cross' yellow tape and an officer who barked at him to stay back. Sac yelled at the officer, "What's going on? My friend lives there! Is he okay?"

The officer looked at Sac for a few seconds, and then called over a detective. The officer told the detective what Sac had said. The detective asked Sac a few questions, like, when was the last time he had seen Butch, what they had been doing, what kind of stuff was he into, and who he hung out with. He also took down Sac's name and address. Sac answered all of his questions and kept asking what happened. The detective turned to leave without answering and then did a half turn back before saying, "Your friend appears to be dead. We can't confirm that for sure yet. We should be able to tomorrow after we examine his body."

"I can identify him for you. I've known him ever since we were little kids."

"Look, you can't identify him because his head is missing. I'll be contacting you some time tomorrow to talk this all over and get your statement."

Sac stood in stunned silence as the night dew seemed to coalesce around him, blocking off his ability to think. He finally realized that his cell phone was ringing and answered it without speaking.

"Sac? Sac? Are you there? What's happening? Sac? Sac?" It was Mal. Sac finally whispered over the phone; "Butch is dead…Cops say his head is missing."

"Oh shit! What happened over there?"

"I have no idea…"

"Sac, I'm almost at Crank's place, meet me there." They hung up and Sac ran back home, got in his car and headed toward his guitar player's

house. They both arrived at the home of their guitarist to find that police cars and an ambulance were there too. Mal knew to avoid talking to the police and instead found an EMT hanging around the back of an ambulance.

"Can you tell us what happened? We know the guy who lives here."

"All I know is that there is a body inside that has been decapitated. The police are taking pictures inside right now. The weird thing about this crime is that the victim's head is missing, but the police say there is another head inside that belongs to someone else." Just then a detective came over and told Mal and Sac to 'beat it.' As the two started to walk away, Mal looked back at the house. The front door had been opened when they arrived, but the police had just shut it for some reason and Mal saw that there was a message written in dripping blood on the door; *My Head Or Yours*.

Sac was still a bit stunned so Mal made him go with him and get into his car. He told Sac what he saw on the door.

"What can all of this mean? We just saw Crank and Butchie at practice. We're supposed to leave on tour. What is going on, Mal?" Sac was shaking as he talked and was almost in tears.

"Pull yourself together. I have an idea. It's crazy, but I think that witch's skull is the cause of all of this. I don't believe in the dead coming back to life, but maybe some crazy witch is pissed that we stole her skull and wants it returned. Let's go get it." They agreed and drove off to their practice room.

They ran in, unlocked it, and went inside. Mal grabbed the backpack. He could feel the weight of the skull inside. He turned to face Sac, who was just behind him and saw two skeletal arms reach out from behind him. Before he could even yell a warning, the hands grasped Sac's head and pulled upward with such a force that his head was torn off before he could scream. Blood streaked Mal's vision, but as Sac's body fell to the ground he saw a headless skeleton standing just inside the room. It had Sac's head in its skeletal hands and was placing the head where its own skull should have been. Mal was frozen as he saw the dead eyes looking at him and he heard a raspy, ethereal voice emit; "*My…head…or…yours…*" The skeleton, now wearing Sac's head, advanced on Mal. With all the faculties left to him, he opened the backpack and lifted the skull out in front of him. The skeleton stopped. It removed Sac's head and tossed it aside as if it were just a head

of cabbage. The skeletal hands reached out and took the ancient skull. It placed it on top of its skeleton before advancing on Mal again…

The next morning the headlines were full of news of the murders:

(Reuters – Salem, Mass.) Last night the city of Salem was rocked by the discovery of a triple murder. Three bodies of the members of a black metal band called Deathstalker were found last night. All three bodies had been decapitated. The police are asking for help in finding the group's singer, Mark O'Neil, who sings under the stage name of Malefice Orator. He is sought for questioning in this case. The police are not divulging any other information at this time, but fans admit that the band practiced satanic rituals and witchcraft and this may have a bearing on these murders. The Chief of Police for Salem is launching a full investigation.

It was a homeless man a few months later that found Mal. After spending the night in the ruins of the old church, he was about to move on when he spotted what looked like a new boot sticking out of the ground. He tried to pick it up; hoping to find the other boot discarded nearby, and managed to pull it off a partially decomposed foot.

After vomiting, the man walked away as fast as he could. A passing squad car saw him leaving the area and was going to pick him up for vagrancy when he told the police what had happened. A forensics team was called out and the witch's grave was dug up for the second time that year. The team found a body, later identified as Mal's. The skeleton of Sarah Good had its arms wrapped around Mal's body. The decomposing head appeared to be frozen in mid-scream. The best the team could figure was that the body had been dragged to this grave and buried alive, but they had no idea how it would have been possible to get the skeleton wrapped around the body so perfectly.

About: *Greg McWhorter*

Greg McWhorter is a pop culture historian and teacher who resides in Southern California. Since the 1980s, he has worked for newspapers, radio, television, and film. He has been a guest speaker at several universities and the San Diego Comic-Con.

Today, McWhorter owns a highly acclaimed record label that specializes in vintage punk rock. He is also the host of a cable TV show entitled *Rock 'n' Roll High School 101*. Lately, McWhorter has been writing nonfiction music-related articles for print and has turned to writing crime and horror fiction. You can follow him at: gregmcwhorter.blogspot.com

THE GREAT MARBELLA HUTCHINS

By

Scathe meic Beorh

She glowed like some kind of phosphorescent creature that cool desert night as she walked down the almost-two-dimensional Boulevard, slow and measured, like the matron of a demesne, or even a queen. I had heard of women like her from voices filled with horror and wonder. “They’re not everywhere, but once you see one, you’ll never forget her as long as you live.”

But I had to do more than see one. I had to talk to one. If she would talk. If she knew where she was. If she knew she was alive.

The kinds of things that haunt me day and night? Velvet curtains, pipe organs, monkey coffins, 78 rpm records, exotic objets d'art, flamingo feathers, mothballs, tuxedos in steamer trunks, wood mold, original S. Charles Lee ticket booths, flashbulb wool, over-size magnifying glasses atop yellowed newspaper clippings, stiff black scrapbook pages, drained swimming pools, pungent funeral flowers, clematis, old theater seats that creak *before* you sit in them, the pink light in the corner of a cinema screen, ill-advised taxidermy, cigarillo-smoking projectionists in mustard-stained tank tops, the back of a starlet's hand seemingly glued to her forehead...

As I came out of the Chinese Theatre, I saw her. I ran. I would catch her, but then what? What then? I didn’t think further than that. I passed her, and slowed. Fifteen feet from her I turned, trying to be nonchalant, trying not to let her know that it was only me and her in my tiny world, nothing else, and that my heart burned to know. I had to know.

“I…”

She took a few more steps toward me in her unearthly gait as her faded blue feather boa fluttered in the breeze of a passing ‘gypsy cab’ and her discolored teal silk evening gown shimmered in an ephemeral Hollywood breeze.

“You?” she said, her puckered cigarette lips smiling, crow’s-feet clawing at her sad, sad eyes.

“I want to know,” I said, breathless. “How… how long. How long…”

“How long have I been living in Hollywood? Is that what you want to know, doll?”

I was suddenly frightened. My mind raced to the film Sunset Blvd. I backed away from her and nearly disappeared into the shadows of a side street. But then I came back to my senses.

“Yeah… yes,” I replied. “Yes ma’am.”

“Oh, a Southern boy!”

“Yes ma’am. Northwest Florida.”

“Oh my word! Why, I’m from Pensacola!”

“Ma’am… now please don’t think I’m lying to you, but I was born and raised in Pensacola.”

“Well... I have a way of telling whether you’re lying to me or not, young man. What part of Pensacola?”

I saw what she meant. “Ferry Pass,” I said.

“Ferry Pass. Sure! Out by the river. See? You’re not a liar. A bit of a lair, maybe, but not a liar. Well, I was raised in Downtown Pensacola. On Seville Square. But that’s been long ago now. But to answer that burning question of yours… say, doll? Would you like to have a drink with me at the Carousel?”

“Yes ma’am, and I’m buying.”

“Such a gentleman!”

“I came to Hollywood in 19 and 29,” said Marbella Hutchins as she fixed a Pall Mall into her shiny black Bakelite ‘opera length’ cigarette holder. “Sixty years ago. Got a light, doll?”

“Yes ma’am,” I said as I fished around in my loose pants pocket for my Zippo. “May I be honest about something, Miss Hutchins?”

“You sure can, sweetheart,” she said, blowing smoke in my face. Classy way to commit suicide... and murder. “Honesty’s all I got left. All I’ve had for lots of years now, come to think of it.”

“People think… people believe, ah, that women like you are, you know…”

“Crazy? Oh, I know that! Why do you think I’m sitting with you talking right now, young man? You’re the only person to talk to me in close to a year, and the last time it was just a hobo wanting a fag. I say something sometimes to a person I know lives around here, not a tourist or anything

like that, and still all I get is a scared look in their eyes like 'Oh god! That insane old broad just spoke to me!'"

I felt like I wanted to cry. I went ahead and did just that. Marbella handed me a bar napkin. It caught three tears before it tore apart. She asked the barkeep for a stack of napkins, then handed me six more before I could fully collect myself.

"You really care about people, don't you, doll?"

"More than anything, Marbella. I guess it's what I do best. Then I go and write it all down."

"Oh! A writer! I should have guessed…"

"Where did you first live here in Hollywood, Miss Hutchins?"

"My first place was in the Regency, just a few buildings north of the Chinese Theatre, on Orange. Something… wrong?"

"No," I replied, realizing that my facial expression had spoken out of turn. "It's just that I live there is all. *The Regency*. Which room was yours?"

"All the way at the back of the building, second floor on the right, as I remember. It's been fifty years, give or take."

"That's… my room. My apartment. There's talk of tearing the old place down. Least that's what I hear."

"I didn't need to hear that, doll. That's not good news. You know Marilyn and Bogie both lived there when they were just getting started, don't you?"

"I heard that, yeah. Pretty thrilling. I've wondered if maybe they stayed in the room I'm in…."

"You said apartment. Those are rooms, not apartments, sweetheart."

"I have, well… you know, a stove, refrigerator…"

"Oh, there was nothing like that in there when I lived there. A Hollywood starlet had to eat at cheap diners and hole-in-the-wall restaurants back then. Well, most of us…"

"I see."

"Do you? Maybe you do. You're a writer after all. Well, I can't imagine trying to cook in such a small place anyways. Not and have room for my dressing table and all my clothes. Still have the Murphy bed that folds down out of the closet?"

I nodded 'yes' and stirred my drink. What should I ask next? I wanted to know it all, but how could I learn over a half-century of knowledge about a lady's life in an hour? Two hours? Three hours? Heck, even three days!

“You want to know how I’ve lived in Hollywood all these years? How I’ve survived?”

“Well, Miss Hutchins,” I said, sure that I had never heard of her or seen her in any film. “Yes, I would like to know how you have survived. But I don’t think it’s any of my business, really.”

“I’ve just made it your business, haven’t I? Listen, doll. I don’t say anything I don’t want to say. I never have, I never will. So here’s the story. I am a wealthy heiress. That means I’m a princess. An old, worn-out princess that everybody thinks is crazy, but a princess nonetheless. Every year that goes by, though, less and less people pay attention to me. It used to hurt something awful, to be ignored. See, I was quite the actress in my day. Leastwise till the War, then everything fell apart on me. I never had more than bit parts even at the height of my career, but then they quit coming along. I couldn’t keep an agent. They all said I was ‘over-the-hill.’ *Lord!* I was only thirty-two! I could have gone back to Pensacola, but why? My mother and father were dead, I had no siblings, and what few relatives I had wanted my inheritance. My father, a wise man when it came to money, sold out before the Crash of ‘29, and then he and my mother were killed in an automobile accident. Everything they had went to me. I had a dream. I wanted to be a movie star. I came, I saw, and I sort of conquered. At any rate, I stayed here in Hollywood. I always lived cheap, preparing for the very real likelihood that I would never become a star. I never did, of course. You ever heard of ‘The Great Marbella Hutchins?’ My last job as an actor was in 1940. I played a WAAC in one of those war commercials they played in the movie houses before the main feature.”

“But… but that’s been almost fifty years ago, Miss Hutchins!”

Marbella looked down at her Tom Collins and swirled the melting ice. “Yes it has, hasn’t it. Another ‘Shirley Temple’ for you, doll?”

“No ma’am. Thank you, though. Why… why do you… still dress as if you were attending a Hollywood soirée?”

“And why shouldn’t I?”

I felt truly embarrassed. I shouldn’t have asked that question. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I dress how I feel. Why shouldn’t you?”

Her smile was genuine. She took my hands in her bony fingers. Her skin felt thin, like my grandmother’s. Marbella was, after all, a very old woman. Despite her evening gown. Despite her boa. Despite her lipstick and rouge.

"Where do you live now?" I asked, trying not to feel ashamed for the whole night, for the kamikaze way I had accosted her, for being such a poor sociologist. A writer. A speculative fiction writer no less. Sociologists condemn us daily for our methods. But that's alright. I condemn them for theirs. Ever tried to read one of their books? More footnotes than actual text, which itself is so filled with fabricated Latinate words that you think you just stepped into the Roman Forum.

"I live at the Knickerbocker," Marbella said. "With all the rest of the old fogies."

"I'm glad. I mean…" God! Open mouth, insert entire leg…

"Ha! You're glad that I don't live on the streets like a nasty old bag-lady!" she replied, genuinely tickled. I relaxed a little.

"Will… you have lunch with me tomorrow, Marbella? My treat. Musso & Frank Grill?"

"Such a gentleman," she replied. "I'd be happy to, doll. I'd be happy to. We'll get one of Louie's tables."

Marbella Hutchins never met me at the famous grill on Hollywood Blvd. I went to the Knickerbocker Hotel looking for her, but the attendant told me in a typical Hollywood matter-of-fact tone that unless one of their elderly residents made prior arrangements, no one was allowed beyond the lobby, and they did not phone up for anyone not found on their 'call list.' So for several days I waited in the lobby for her, hoping she would come out, hoping I would hear that she had been feeling just a bit under the weather or something. But I never saw Marbella again. Not on the Boulevard. Not anywhere in Hollywood. Not even in my dreams.

About: *Scathe meic Beorh*

Scathe meic Beorh is the author of *Children & Other Wicked Things* and *Dark Sayings of Old* (James Ward Kirk Fiction), *Always After Thieves Watch* and *The Pirates of St. Augustine* (Wildside Press). He once lived in Hollywood, and misses the verve there, but today he lives with his wife Ember in a quaint Edwardian neighborhood filled with old houses, palm and pecan trees, laughing kids on bicycles, and barking dogs.

THE INGÉNUE

By

Pepper Scoville

Alice watched from the wings as Rowena Towers strode the boards. The audience hung on her every word, hypnotized by the graceful sway of her body, enchanted by the emotions she drew from them. Every performance was a work of art and her patrons were vast and many.

Alice stood in awe. She was terrified that she'd miss her cue but she couldn't help being as enraptured as everyone else. When Alice decided to become an actress, she'd not only taken class after class, learning everything there was to know about the craft. She'd also studied the actors and actresses, determined to emulate and eventually eclipse the best of them. Her research was about to be rewarded, she just knew it.

Rowena Towers was the Queen of Broadway. She'd never been in a show that lost money. If you could get her to perform in your theater, you knew you'd be turning them away at the door. It was Alice's goal to learn everything she could from the woman.

"But where is that maid?" Rowena bellowed.

Alice burst onto the stage, mop and bucket in hand to deliver her two lines. "I'm so sorry, Lady Margrave! The wind is strong tonight."

The audience roared with laughter, more off the look Rowena's Lady Margrave gave them than the delivery of the line, which was really quite silly. In fact, the entire play would have been a flop if not for Rowena's talent.

Alice remained onstage, in the background, for the rest of the act. She mimicked cleaning while the other actor created drama and tension around her. The curtain fell. As it reopened, the entire supporting cast came out to take their bows. They backed up to allow the leads, save Rowena, to return to the stage. Those bows met with thunderous applause.

Then it was Rowena's turn.

She returned on her own, no spotlight sharing for her. Flowers fell at her feet, men and women shouted their love for her. She blew them kisses and basked in the adulation.

The curtain closed, muffling the still rolling applause from the actors. The older, more jaded thespians pulled off wigs and cumbersome costumes before they had even made it to the wings. The leads congratulated each other on another successful night and headed into the darkness. Only Alice and Rowena were left on the stage.

Rowena suddenly looked much older and tired. Alice felt sorry for the woman who always seemed to be alone. It wasn't that the others didn't care for her, it was almost as if she were so above them talent-wise that they couldn't imagine she would want their company. Alice certainly felt that way but she also sensed that the isolation Rowena's gifts created caused her a lot of pain as well.

"Do you need help back to your dressing room?" Alice asked.

Rowena's eyes blazed. "I might be older than you but I'm not elderly!" snapped the actress. Alice's cheeks reddened and she mumbled an apology. She fled to the safety of the backstage area where stagehands milled around and the prop mistress and her assistants secured the props so they'd be ready for the next show.

Waiting until her tears had dried and she regained her composure, Alice returned to the dressing room she shared with the other bit players. A few remaining cast members wiped the last of the make-up from their faces before dashing over to the bar next door. They either ignored Alice or gave her a withering glance. No one needed a wannabe ingénue stepping on them to fast track her way to the middle. They'd seen and done it all before and she'd learn it, too. If she lasted long enough.

Young women rarely did around here.

So many fresh faced actresses, fresh off the buses from Middle America, their headshots clutched in their little hands like tickets to the ball. The first week they reveled in their fifth floor walk-ups with no air conditioning. They were in the big city now. They were in the game. Waking early each morning, they'd go to every open audition they could find. Too soon the little money they'd saved to come to the big city ran out. They had to take jobs waiting tables or tending bar in sleazy dives. Some became dancers, others whores. Most called mommy and daddy for a ticket back home. Others never made it that far.

Alice had heard the stories that surrounded Rowena Towers, the understudies that went insane, or tried to kill themselves. Once, one even tried to kill Rowena. Many disappeared without a trace.

Nothing was ever proven, and actors, for the most part, are not known for their mental stability. Most chalked it up to bad luck and the nature of the profession. Alice was determined not to become one of them.

Alice rubbed her face with a baby wipe, removing the thick theatrical make-up. She replaced it with a tinted moisturizer and a bit of blush. Her eyes retained some of the liner from the stage (she could never seem to remove all of her eye make-up, no matter how hard she scrubbed), so a bit of gloss to her lips was all that was needed to touch it up.

She had always been told she was a natural beauty and back home it made her stand out, made her special. But here, no one could care less. Beautiful women were a dime a dozen. Talent was what set you apart. You couldn't just be a good actress; you had to be a great one. If you managed to be amazing, that was even better. Alice was a good actress but Rowena Towers was amazing. She knew if she could just get the older actress to invest a bit of time in her, perhaps even mentor her, she would blossom under the tutelage.

A metal door slammed shut, breaking Alice out of her reverie. She glanced around and realized she was alone. Silence shrouded the dark hallway. Alice crept along the corridor, both hoping and dreading to run into someone else. She rounded the corner and noticed dim light peeking out from under a door.

Rowena's dressing room.

She tiptoed closer and heard sucking sounds. The hair on the back of her neck stood up but she felt strangely aroused as well. Rowena hadn't shown any interest in fellow cast members. Heat filled Alice as the thought of Rowena luring one of the rough stagehands back to her dressing room for a quick fuck entered her mind.

Trembling, she slid along the wall, the sucking noises growing louder as she neared the actress's dressing room. "Enough," Rowena called out. Sounds of a struggle rumbled from behind the closed door. "I said enough!"

The struggle intensified. Wood cracked, a glass shattered. Alice covered her mouth with her hand. What should she do? There was no one to call. Everyone else had gone home. Her hand grasped the doorknob.

A gurgling, strangling sound issued forth. Alice remained frozen with indecision. Finally she reached an internal compromise and she knocked on the door. No answer. She knocked again with more urgency.

A shuffle. The crunch of broken glass.

The door opened. Rowena peeked out. “What do you want?” she snarled.

“I heard noises.”

“Congratulations, you’re not deaf.”

“I just wanted to see if you were okay.”

“I’m fine. Move along, nothing to see here.”

Rowena tried to shut the door on Alice but the young woman put her foot between the door and its frame. Her reward was a crushed foot. She yelped and yanked her foot back.

“Shit,” Rowena said as she watched Alice hop on one foot. “Sorry about that. Not that you didn’t deserve it.” She turned away from the door and headed further into the dressing room. She wore only a thin dressing gown and high heels. Her hair was piled on top of her head. Small strands fell from the messy bun which might look sloppy on most women but on Rowena gave her a tousled, satiated look. Alice watched her, still in the hallway, cradling her foot. Rowena glanced over her shoulder. Something in the older woman’s demeanor had changed. She smiled slyly and tilted her head. “Well, come on then. Are you coming in or not?”

Alice favored her sore foot and limped in. Rowena shut the door behind them. Alice glanced around, taking in her surroundings. The dressing room was as big if not bigger than the one she had to share with the other supporting actors. Flowers from admirers covered every available surface. An attractive sofa sat against one wall, the other was dedicated to an enormous mirror that reflected the entire room back at the viewer. An opaque screen shielded a clothing rack from the women.

There was no one else in the room.

Alice hesitated. “Sorry, I thought I heard you yelling at someone.”

Rowena chuckled. “I was probably just running lines for an upcoming project. You can’t really grasp a line’s potential until you say it out loud.” She bent down to pick up a broken champagne bottle. Alice scurried over to help.

Rowena stepped back and let Alice do the work. She wandered over to the vanity and pulled a bottle of amber verdant liquid from the bottom drawer. “Fancy a drop?” She asked.

“I usually don’t,” Alice replied.

Rowena’s eyes narrowed, interest waning by the second.

“I mean, why not? Sure,” Alice blurted.

Rowena's lips curved into a smile that wasn't entirely pleasant. The green liquid splashed into a couple of wine glasses and Rowena handed one to Alice.

Alice took a large gulp and immediately coughed, the drink burning her throat and causing her eyes to water. "Take it slow," Rowena said, amusement dancing on her voice. Alice nodded and took a small sip. Heat spread through her body from her stomach outward. Her head felt fuzzy, her tongue thick. Rowena helped her onto the sofa. "It's awfully late to be at the theater. Don't you have someone to go home to?" Alice shook her head. "Pity. Me neither. It's hard to have a relationship when the stage is your first love."

Alice nodded and took another sip of the liquor. Movement caught her eye and her head turned, oh-so-slowly, toward the screen. Rowena grabbed Alice's chin and forced her gaze back.

Rowena's lips brushed Alice's. The young woman trembled, eyes wide, but didn't pull away. Lips parted, her eyes drifted shut as Rowena licked and sucked at her mouth. Passive, she allowed Rowena to pull her shirt over her head. Kisses followed on the bared skin. Alice's bra was snapped open and fell away. Pointed, painted nails dug into Alice's skin, just enough to scratch but not enough to break it. The nails traced the curve of Alice's breasts and stopped to tease the nipples. Alice moaned and grabbed Rowena's hair, her fingers digging into the messy bun.

Rowena pushed Alice back until she lay down on the sofa. Quick fingers undid the buttons of Alice's skirt and had it over Alice's hips in a flash. Alice lifted to allow her skirt to be removed. Rowena's lips traced a line down her flat abdomen over her navel and down to the band of her panties.

A shadow moved behind the screen. Alice rolled Rowena onto her back, nipped at her inner thighs. In turn, Rowena wrapped her thighs around Alice's head, pinning her to the sofa. Alice nipped and sucked. Through heavy lidded eyes, Rowena came as she watched a deformed creature slither out from behind the screen. Brown skin with mottled green markings, it had a humanoid form, misshapen head, muscular arms that ended in thick, sausage-like fingers, tipped with razor sharp claws. Its body spread below the waist to a singular tube that fattened where its hips should be then narrowed to a slug-like tail. It had no legs but made up for it by

using its strong arms to skitter across the floor towards the sofa, the tail slipping back and forth like a snake.

Rowena crooked a finger and the creature slithered closer. Alice raised her face, cheeks covered in Rowena's spendings. Rowena smiled her carnivore smile down at the young lady. "Good bye, lovely. This was quite fun, I'm actually sad to see you go."

The creature reared up.

Alice returned the smile. "Druroga," she replied.

Rowena's smile fell. "What did you say?"

"I'm young, but not stupid." Alice wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "There are some of us that know about the old ways. Becoming successful can be such a double edged sword, can't it?"

Panic filled Rowena's eyes. She snapped her fingers. "Runata!"

Dull eyed, the creature's gaze volleyed back and forth between the women.

Alice sneered. "You really didn't think someone would put together how a nobody suddenly shoots to the top? A literal overnight success?"

Rowena bellowed at the creature. "Nashrona! Runata!"

The creature snarled and lunged… and attacked Rowena. Alice slid out of the way as the older woman's curses and screams filled the room with obscenities. "No! I am your mistress. I am!"

The thing eviscerated Rowena with one swipe of its claw. It fed on the bowels and viscera as they poured from her abdomen. Slurping, greedy, it ate and ate until it looked drunk with satisfaction. The creature's rheumy green eyes slid over to Alice.

She stood tall, willing her knees not to knock. These things could smell fear and only responded to power and strength. "Druroga echnauh."

The creature unfurled its tongue, still dripping with Rowena's blood. The tongue was a foot long and thick as a man's forearm at its base which then tapered down to a fork, each prong the size of a finger. It waggled suggestively at Alice, each side of the forked tongue independent of the other. She strode over, grabbed the creature by its lumpy ears, and straddled its face. The tongue plunged deep inside her, quickly stretching her to the point of pain. She held on and rode the muscle as it writhed around inside her. It plunged and pumped, twirled and swirled. As Alice's orgasm broke, the creature exhaled and pushed the spirit of Rowena's talent deep inside of her.

Alice's brain struggled to comprehend the sudden onslaught of knowledge. Pictures and words flashed by. A cacophony of sound as voices from the beginning of theater, perhaps even the beginning of time, whispered, spoke, screamed their secrets to her. She could feel her mind pushed to the breaking point. The terrible knowledge forced her to the edge of madness.

Alice stood on a precipice, eyes wide, skewered on the tongue of a vile being that pumped all the secrets of the stage inside of her. Just as she felt her sanity slip, the creature moaned. She hazarded a glance down to find the creature stroking its penis that started as a thick shaft but split into three prongs. Her breasts burned, felt stretched. Her fingers fluttered across one rigid nipple. A greenish white discharge oozed from the tip. The creature sniffed, smelled the vile milk.

The tongue slid out of her and the creature shimmied up her body, latching onto her breast. There was a sharp burn then relief as the milk let down. The creature slurped, contented. After a couple of minutes, Alice managed to pull its lips from her nipple and onto the other where the same burning and release occurred.

As the creature suckled, Alice stroked its lumpy head and fantasized about her future. Rowena was so shortsighted, sticking to Broadway, fearing the expanse of Los Angeles. She was afraid of the creature, afraid of losing control and by extension, her success. Alice had no such fear. She knew she could keep the creature contented, keep it fed on the wave after wave of hopefuls that flooded the city with stars in their eyes and dreams in their hearts. She also knew that she wouldn't underestimate the hunger of the up and comers. California, here she came. Her hand reached down and lazily stroked the three-pronged member, causing the monster to groan and buck. Yes, she knew how to handle the demon of fame. She could already imagine her name in lights.

About: *Pepper Scoville*

Pepper Scoville has been writing stories since she could hold a pencil and
horror is her first love. She lives in the subconscious of another, more

timid writer and emerges only when duty calls. She enjoys moonlit walks
and things that go bump in the night. You can find her other work in such
anthologies as *Fifty Shades of Decay* and *Hell Whore II* or on twitter @pepperscoville

THE MAN WHO SOLD HIS SOUL TO WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

By

David Landrum

Preston Winslow sat across from Maz Rudolph and wondered how much of a chance he had of getting the part for which he had auditioned that afternoon. Competition was fierce. He was up against several British actors, some with more experience acting Shakespeare than he had accrued, despite the summer he spent playing parts in Stratford, Ontario. Maz had already landed her role. She had lucked out. Preston did not feel lucky. The audition had gone well, but he doubted he would be the one chosen to play the part.

"Calm down," Maz told him. "You did a marvelous job."

They had let her see the audition because she had played a role with the Royal Shakespeare Company already. He glanced at her. She had the perfect form to be an actress: slender, delicate, with a pretty face and white-blonde hair. Everything about her looked in perfect balance and proportion.

"It would be great to be Hamlet to your Ophelia."

"The way he treats her?" she quipped. They both laughed.

He had met her at Oxford. Maz (short for Margaret) had signed on as understudy for an RSC production of *Measure for Measure*. Two days before the first performance, the lead actress walked out and Maz got to play all seven. The people from Stratford, UK, liked her so much they gave her this role and, in the fall, the female lead in *As You Like It.* Her career was made. Preston wished he could say as much for his own career.

"I put in a good word for you with the director. I used to date him, so I think I have a little clout there."

Preston wished he could land the role of Hamlet as adroitly as he had landed Maz. She had a boyfriend who was an actor and a mime. He did juggling and street theater but she had "put him on hold" (her term) after Preston came on to her down in Oxford. The director liked her, too, though her reciprocation of his affection qualified as a smart career move. He had probably gotten tired of her pretty quickly. "Date him" was undoubtedly a euphemism. Preston and Maz had travelled to Stratford together and were

sharing a room. Maz's beauty astonished him. There were plenty of beautiful women in the world of acting, but her honesty and relative lack of affectation especially appealed to him. She came from Yorkshire, in the north of England, a little more provincial, and lacked the vanity and egotism of most of the theater people he had meet since coming here.

"Do you think my accent will work against me?"

"They hire Americans all the time."

"I think they've got it out for us."

"Not in the way you talk."

He remembered the scene in *The King's Speech* where the character played by Jeffery Rush auditions for Richard III and is told by the snooty British judges, "I was not aware Richard was from the colonies." He drummed his fingers on the tabletop.

"Let's go down to the church. You said you've never been there. Maybe the spirit of Will Shakespeare will shed some of his influence for you."

"I need all the help I can get."

They left the pub and walked to Holy Trinity Church. The sun shone brightly. Tourists filled the street. Maz, who was a quirky dresser, had on a sixties-style bright yellow minidress, ankle boots, and a straw hat. He thanked his lucky stars that he had been able to win her affection, though he suspected that she missed her old boyfriend. They went inside Holy Trinity Church, which was oddly empty and quiet, given the large numbers of tourists in town.

They read the famous inscription.

"I wonder if I threatened to dig him up if he'd go to bat for me."

"Why don't you ask him?" She smiled.

Preston did not believe the supernatural existed outside of peoples' imaginations. But he composed a prayer, a wish—maybe it was more like an impulse—that Shakespeare's spirit or ghost or the energy he had generated through a life of supreme creativity, would go to bat for him. *Stupid*, he thought. *For all our supposed sophistication we are still Neanderthals groveling in fear of unseen gods.* Maz yawned. "Let's go back to our room."

She dozed off after they had made love. He went downstairs to get a drink. The place they had lucked out to get a room in had stood since Shakespeare's day. Rumor had it he once stayed there when he found

himself between jobs. As Preston drank a locally brewed ale, a tall, powerfully built man came up to him.

"You need to come with me," he said in a Scots brogue. Preston looked over at him. He had a look on his face suggesting cruelty and violence were the only things he understood. Preston felt something against his ribs. The man had poked a long switchblade into his side. His eyes glittered with the anticipation of driving it in. Preston felt a hand clap his shoulder.

"Come on, boy. No one will hurt you if you cooperate."

The man who had put a hand on his shoulder was obese, though very tall—probably six five or so. He had a ruddy face that looked all the more ruddy for being framed with red hair and a beard. Preston looked about him. None of the people in the bar or the bartender seemed to have noticed what was going on.

"Don't push us to do something unseemly," the man with the knife said. "Get up and come with us."

He stood, still amazed no one had noticed. He wanted to run or shout for help, but the knife against his ribs enforced his silence. They walked out of the bar into a small room. A man behind a battered desk looked up at him.

Preston thought he might faint. He looked exactly like the painting he had seen last week at the National Portrait Gallery in London: black shirt, receding hairline, gold earring, swarthy skin, dark eyes, scraggly beard. When Preston did not speak, the man said, "The portrait you saw was painted after I passed off the scene. It doesn't look exactly like me, but looking exactly like the painting is better for recognition in situations like this one."

Preston stared. The man seemed faintly amused and just a little scornful. He glanced past Preston.

"Cawdor, Sir John, leave us. I'll call you if I need you."

Preston heard the switchblade close up. The two men walked out of the room.

"Now," the man said. "You expressed some interest in enlisting my help?"

Preston continued to stare stupidly. The man met his eyes. He got his breath and replied, "I did, but"—

The man waved his hand. “I’m not here to discuss paranormal possibilities. You want that part in *Hamlet*. You want success as an actor. I can give it to you, for a price.”

“What price?”

He sighed. “I don’t want to say your soul—that word has too many theological implications. Let’s call it . . . your destiny, the energy of your life, your fate—the voyage you will take through coming years. Give me control of that and you will have all you want. The only stipulation”—

“What?”

“I get to write your life for you. I get to decide if it will be a comedy or a tragedy. You’ll have the success you want as an actor. I only get to write the story, create the character, and decided what the ending will be like. If you agree, you can sign. If not . . . my time is valuable.”

Preston stood a moment, indecision paralyzing him. The man impatiently tapped a goose quill pen on the old, worn wood of the table.

“Yes, done. I agree.”

He pushed a document forward. “Read it and sign.”

The document stated what the man had already said. A wave of caution swept over Preston. Giving control of your life to a spirit could never be a good thing. He thought then of how much he loved to act, how badly he wanted to make it as an actor, and then of Maz’s beautiful, ravishing body upstairs, asleep. He took the quill.

“Do I have to sign in my blood?”

The man laughed. “You’re thinking about Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, the scene where the good doctor sells his soul. That was the Devil. I am not the Devil and you are not selling me your soul in that sense. Plain ink will do nicely.”

Preston scrawled his signature on the parchment. The man took the quill back.

“Excellent. Go back to your room now. That pretty little wench you’ve bedded has some good news to tell you.”

“Will I see you again?”

The man laughed loudly. “Nice pun. Quibbles are *not* the lowest form of humor. Yes, you *will*.”

His two escorts—the fat one and the violent one—led him out into the main room of the pub. The door closed. Preston turned. The two of them were nowhere to be seen.

He went back up to his room. Maz met him at the door. She had on a dressing gown.

"Preston, I just got a call from the RSC. You got the part!"

His portrayal of Hamlet caught the notice of critics. Favorable reviews appeared in the *London Times*, *New York Times*, and elsewhere. All the performances for the show sold out. Offers to act on stage and in film rolled in that summer. Preston established himself as a presence in the acting community and laid the foundation for a successful career.

Maz left him at the end of September, returning to her old boyfriend in London. Preston felt the sting of it. Though she told him she was leaving in a civil and wistful manner, the hurt went deep. Success as an actor apparently did not mean you got whatever you wanted.

Other women soon showed up to replace Maz, though none of the relationships he entered into worked out. The years passed. Preston did stage, films, television. He found admission to the ranks of superstar actors. Wealth, celebrity, all the things he had dreamed of were his. His life, he once said in an interview, seemed like a long, ongoing fairy tale.

One night, as he sat in the bar of an old, exclusive club in New York City, a figure entered the members-only lounge. It was Cawdor. He sat down at Preston's table.

"You're a member here?" Preston asked him.

"I can generally go where I need to go."

"What do you want?"

"He sent me to tell you he's done his part of the deal. You're famous and successful."

"I'd agree with that."

"He wants you to know from now on it's going to be his part of the deal."

"What do you mean?"

"He's going to start writing your life for you."

"Hasn't he been doing that for fifteen years now?"

Cawdor laughed. "You're perceptive. He likes tragedy. You've noticed relationships have not worked out really well. Two divorces. Women bailing on you. The girl I saw you with the first night was a pretty little piece of tail. Too bad she slipped off."

Maz Rudolph, who had become a top-tier stage actress, had married her mime/street-performing boyfriend after dumping Preston. The two of

them had been married probably twelve years and had three children.

"She was nice. At least I was able to get into that pretty little tail a few times before we split."

"She's doing *Hamlet* in London—same part she had back when the two of you shared the stage. You really ought to go to see her perform."

"Is this Mr. Shakespeare's idea of a tragedy? I watch an old lover on stage?"

Cawdor smiled. He had large, white teeth.

"Maybe it is. Or maybe it's the first act."

"I'm not going to London."

"I think you are; or I think you had better. You signed a contract."

"Are you going to force me to go?"

"No, I'm going to kill you if you fail to go." Cawdor's eyes flashed with greedy fire. "I don't get to do that very often these days, Mr. Winslow. It's a pity. I wouldn't mind cutting you into small pieces like I did the rebel Macdonwald. 'From the nave to the chaps,' my boss wrote. He wanted to surrender, but I thrust my sword in and slowly brought it up from the navel all the way to this mouth. You'd be surprised how resilient the human body is and how long a man can survive even with five inches of steel stuck in his guts. After he finally died, I cut his head off and set it on our battlements."

"Don't threaten me."

"I'll threaten you all I want. My associates are eager to get their hands on you: Tyrell, Brutus, Bolingbroke, Tybalt. All of them would delight to get a shot at you. Tragedies can end in many different ways."

"So I am a tragedy?"

"Apparently so."

Preston looked at Cawdor. He laughed.

"Don't even think about it, Winslow. I got in here. There's no place you can hide from me. Do you think the police can protect you?" He looked around him. "This club has been around for over a hundred years. I remember sitting in this room with John Wilkes Booth. He went out in a blaze of glory—literally."

"You mean Booth"—

"Just like you," Cawdor cut in. "Success and then tragedy. But Booth's name is immortalized. Maybe yours will become immortal as well."

Preston saw Sir John, dressed in a tux, over by the door. Preston looked up at Cawdor.

"The time when you watch the girl play on stage is up to you," Cawdor said. "The show runs two more weeks. It's popular, so be sure you put in for ticket early."

Cawdor got up and walked out the door. He and Sir John left. Outside, rain fell in a steady downpour.

****

Rain was falling in London too when Preston got there. He checked into his room, arranged for a call girl, and, when he had finished with her, got ready to attend the performance. Just as he finished dressing, a busboy delivered a note for him. He opened the envelope and read.

Preston—
I heard you were in London. After the performance
why don't you come to my room at the Corinthia?
We'll talk about old times.
—Maz

She had signed it with her old nickname, which she never used in her career. She was Margaret Rudolf to her admirers around the world. He smiled. She had invited him up to her room rather than meeting him in the hotel bar. Maybe, he thought, Cawdor was wrong. Maybe it would not be a tragedy after all.

He dressed and drove alone to the theater. A valet took his car. When he walked into the theater, cameras flashed. All the columnists would know he and Maz had once been in a relationship. Hollywood gossip columnists had mentioned their connection before.

Many of his friends and associates from the theater world were present. He greeted them and hobnobbed. Cameras went off. Tomorrow the shots would appear on the internet. He had a drink in the lobby—several drinks, in fact, so that by the time the usher led him to his seat, he was nicely buzzed.

Preston had played Hamlet several times. He critiqued the lead actors and, especially, the lead actor's interaction with Ophelia, Maz's character.

She played a mildly insane Ophelia—not the anguished bipolar Ophelia Diane Venora had portrayed for the New York Shakespeare troupe or the manic but calculating Ophelia Helena Bonham Carter did in Mel Gibson's movie version. Maz's rendering of the character made her abject without being pathetic, incisive in her madness, and (she gave a special twist with this), sexy without the crudeness and bawdry that the original text made possible but not necessary. Her incredible, delicate beauty lent poignancy to the character she created.

When the play ended, when curtain calls were done, he made his way back to the lobby.

"As someone who has played *Hamlet* frequently, what's your take on this performance?" a journalist asked him.

He delivered short, calculated statements, mostly praise with a few mild criticisms.

"And what do you have to say about Margaret Rudolf's performance?"

He only said, "Brilliant."

After more drinks, he walked two blocks to her hotel. He stumbled into her room. She looked beautiful, her hair long, not short like she had worn when they were together. A lavender miniskirt hung on her delicate body and contrasted in a striking way with her light hair and pale skin. She gave him a small kiss on the lips and poured whisky for them. Despite bearing three children, Maz had remained as slender and youthful as the way he remembered her in their early days. They drank and talked. He thought he detected warmth in her eyes and voice—not the warmth an old friend offers when seeing you after a hiatus of many years, but the warmth of desire. It floated like a wisp of smoke in the wind as he vividly remembered the beauty of her naked body, the gentle passion of her lovemaking, and her quietness. He wanted her. He was certain she felt the same thing for him. Otherwise, why the invitation to come up to her room?

As they conversed, she loosened up, took his hands and, maybe more at his initiation than hers, leaned over and kissed him again. She laughed as they drew apart.

"Got to go. I'll be right back," she said.

She scurried to the bathroom. Preston stood unsteadily. When Maz emerged from the privy, he caught her near the door, pushed her against the wall, and planted a crushing kiss on her lips.

He expected her to resist at first but felt certain she would stop repelling his embrace; that her lips would soften and she would yield to the passion he was sure she still felt. When she hit at him and tried to protest, a surge of anger ran through him. She got one hand free and scratched him on the cheek.

"Quit!" she screamed, pulling her head to one side. His anger exploded. He seized her shoulders and banged her head against the wall. She screamed.

"Shut up!" he shouted, rage overwhelming him. "Shut up!" He repeatedly slammed the back of her head against the wall of her hotel room. She fought and struggled but suddenly grew still and heavy in his grip.

His vision cleared. Maz's head drooped forward. He lifted her chin. Her blue eyes stared blankly upward. Her mouth hung open. He saw no movement on her lips or on her face. She was a dead weight in his arms. He thought he must have knocked her out.

"Maz?"

No reply. He did not want to shake her anymore. He slowly realized what he had done. No light in her eyes; no strength, no motion in her body. She was dead. He had killed her.

Preston turned. As he did, the door to the room opened. Three hotel staff stood there; besides them, a police officer. Further back, a discernible smirk on his face, stood Cawdor; further off, looking a little sad, Sir John.

****

In the United States, he would have faced the death penalty. In the UK, sentences of death were not handed out. During closing statements in court, before the verdict and sentence, Maz's husband delivered an emotional denunciation of Preston. Heather Alabaster, wife of actor Jonathon Carlton and a celebrity philanthropist, wept though a recollection of her and Maz's student days at Oxford; and of seeing her first role there with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Her producer called Preston, "The most reprehensible man in England." The judge gave him twenty years in prison. The charge was manslaughter, not murder. He had not acted, the court decided, with malice aforethought.

In the weeks before his transfer to a prison in the north of England, his life had already become cells, and manacles. Whispers from long-time

prisoners threatening to kill or emasculate him for murdering “that pretty little girl” rang in his memory. Pictures of Margaret Rudolf in her angelic beauty flooded the internet and print press. Photos of her equally adorable little boys and grieving husband abounded. At the trial, those in the gallery glared at him with a combination of rage, hatred, and astonished censure.

When the transfer from the London jail took place, the press showed up in force. Rain fell in a light, steady drizzle. Manacled, wearing prison transfer fatigues, he shuffled to the van as scores of cameras flashed and whorled. In the crowd he saw Cawdor, Sir John, and the man who had started the whole thing. He had known they would be there. Had the tragedy come to its conclusion, or was it only beginning? He had no way of knowing. The police helped him into the van and closed the door. The driver kicked the vehicle into gear and they began driving north.

About: *David Landrum*

David Landrum’s speculative fiction has appeared widely in journals and anthologies in the US, UK, Australia, and Canada, most recently in *Sanitarium, The Horror Ezine, Sorceress Signals, Dance Macabre,* and *Erotique*.

THE NEW MODEL

By

Matthew Wilson

Fame won't change me.

I always wanted to be an actress. Seeing those bright and beautiful faces up on screen has given me a buzz that has never been surpassed by any other media. To be the heroine swept up in the arms of a hero is something wonderful that never happened this side of celluloid.

But who was I? A divorced, friendless reject. I had little beauty left after my ex had finished with his fists. Maybe I could get a job as a makeup artist for hiding the bruises, but a quick patch up and cheek blusher got my foot in the door.

The agency liked my photos, my style and false confidence. They said to come back next week. Fingers crossed. It seems like fate that things moved in my direction.

I couldn't believe it. Vile stories made me sure I would have to leap into bed with the first producer that asked, but I had my screen test. It was perfect and good things were mentioned.

Till I came home and nearly had a heart attack when I bumped into Robert in the kitchen. He had left me without a pot to piss in, but when a friend inadvertently let on there was a chance I would be on TV, making some serious money, it seemed inevitable on reflection he would come back.

I had struggled so much for so little all these years, and now it was here, he was willing to throw it all away. He knew my secrets; the time he made me have an abortion for he would have no child taking his drink money.

The network had a family feeling. They would hardly like their audience to be greeted by someone like me. He had photos of the time he made me perform sex acts on him and unless I would pay up some money, he felt sure - quite by accident - they might be leaked online.

I promised to pay him off. We went our separate ways at last, but I knew that this was just the start. He would spend all the money I gave him

and time and time again, he would return, sober and demanding more.

But cross your fingers, and things have a way of working themselves out.

The first thing I bought with my first pay check was a stick of gum. The second was the number of a good hitman. He was dark, mean and moody. The perfect combination for a cold killing machine.

I told the police my ex had been out of my life for several months, which was true. If he had the misfortune of being drunk and falling off a high roof, that was his own business.

I had told the hitman to make it look like an accident, and he proved most adept at his business.

But then, certain demons plagued me and the idea of all my secrets worked against me. All my life I had nothing, and smiling for the cameras, being asked for my autograph in the street, all I can think is how much I could lose if my previous acquaintances become tempted to go to the nearest magazine and give my secrets away.

Oh, Sally Carter? Did you know she lost her virginity before the other women in her street?

Would the press want a role model like that? They would drop me like a ton of bricks.

Luckily, things have a habit of working themselves out. Recently, people in my street have been struck by a series of accidents. I had not talked to Benjamin Sampson since he took me to the prom and reached second base.

Someone cut the gas mains to number twenty four and the house that exploded rained down for many minutes. All terrible incidents, but so far there has been no bad press about me.

Have you heard about Becky? She has the cheek to wish half the coast good morning, yet organised the murder of her ex-husband.

In fact, it has reached the point that the only person still alive who knows my secrets, the desperate slob I was before I showed the world my new face is my hit man.

That is easily sorted I suppose. But where do I get a hit man to take out my hit man?

About: ***Mathew Wilson***

Matthew Wilson, 30, is a UK resident who has been writing since small. Recently these stories have appeared in Horror Zine, Starline Poets Association and Sorcerers Signal. He is currently editing his first novel and can be contacted on twitter @matthew94544267.

THE REPO-MAN

By

Carl Fox

There was a knock at the door and Thay Bennett trembled.

He was sat alone in his large, old-fashioned house on the outskirts of the small town of Afsut, sitting in the large, leather chair, deep in depressing thought as he downed a small whiskey. He had so much more left to offer, but he had noticed this day in particular, as he was working on his latest novel, that he couldn't justify the main character's reasoning. It was about a woman, raped as a teenager, who is haunted by an incubus that has taken on the form of her aborted rape child in hope of being reborn. Thay just couldn't make it sound right.

Knowing that this day was fast approaching, Thay had arranged everything, putting all of his affairs into order as best he could. But he didn't want it to be over already. It was too soon. He didn't want to open the door.

As if sensing his thoughts, the figure at the door knocked again, this time more of a pounding; demanding and merciless. As if it was a summoning tone, something forced Thay to his feet and towards his door. Standing there, looking through the frosted glass, he saw a dark, looming figure peering in. Terror swarmed through Thay, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. This was it, his time had come.

Unable to stop himself, Thay opened the door, and found himself staring at a tall dark man, clothed in a thick, heavy black coat that stretched all the way to his feet. The collar was up high, from which emerged a thick black scarf wrapped round the lower face; the upper face covered by large dark glasses and a wide-brimmed fedora hat. Even his hands were covered in thick leather gloves, taut and tight as he held onto a black briefcase with a golden pentagram inside an octagon as an insignia.

There was something about him that reminded Thay of Claude Raines in *The Invisible Man*. Indeed, he spoke with the same, smooth, silky voice that Claude Raines was famous for using.

‘Greetings, Mr. Bennett,’ the dark man said, the scarf barely moving as he spoke. ‘I trust you had an arrangement with a colleague of mine. I am the Repo-man and I have come to collect.’

‘But it can’t be time already,’ pleaded Thay. ‘I have so much more left to do.’

‘Let us go inside, shall we?’

The Repo-man held such a presence that Thay had no option but to let the dark figure in. As he followed the Repo-man into his own home, Thay remembered what had happened eight years ago.

***

In that long ago time, a strange man came to Afsut. A mysterious man who was known only as the Magician.

He was a tall man, clothed in a simple shirt, black leather jacket, worn jeans and boots. Handsome and strong looking, he had shoulder-length dark hair that seemed to shift from brown to black wherever he went. His eyes did the same, shifting from blue, green, grey and even black. He had the sort of presence that made every woman swoon, and every man jealous.

The Magician walked through the streets, performing strange and impossible feats of magic. Feats that made even the most skeptical spectator question what they were seeing and unable to find any rational explanation for it.

Thay was one of the people who was skeptical at first, and always came to watch, to see if there was some form of trickery. Yet, during the whole week the Magician performed, Thay just couldn’t work it out, and he grew more and more enthralled by what he was seeing.

As an aspiring young author, Thay always left his mind open to everything, and he soon started to believe that there was something about this Magician.

Especially when the Magician came to him on the final night he was in town.As he did every night, Thay was in the Spartan living room of his small, simple and cheap apartment, looking blankly at the empty, white page on his iPad. The keyboard was up and ready, but there was nothing else on the screen. Every night, he stared at it, waiting for something to flare in his mind, causing his fingers to explode in a mad flurry of typing, filling the empty screen with words.

But there was nothing.

For the past six months, Thay had had no luck with writing, and he had been writing on and off for the past twelve years. To date, he had not been published, and even he admitted that his work was useless. No wonder he had no luck with it.

On that particular night, Thay was sat down, waiting for the inspiration to hit him, when there was a knock at the door. Answering, he found himself greeted by the tall, enigmatic figure of the Magician, with his sheer presence. Thay invited him in without even remembering it and the Magician glanced at the various scribbled notes spread over Thay's stained coffee table.

'Interesting,' commented the Magician in his deep voice. 'Writing stories has been the groundwork of civilization. History, myth, passing of information. All of it being the creation and retelling of stories.'

'Is there anything I can do for you?' Thay asked.

'Please, Mr. Bennett, I am here to help you.'

'How the hell do you know my name?'

'I help those who feel cheated in life,' the Magician said, ignoring the question. 'Have you ever felt that way? No matter how hard you have tried, no matter how hard you have worked for something, you just can't seem to get anywhere. Yet, you still get those individuals who get everything they ever desired, and more, for nothing. More than that, they are never grateful for it.'

'That's life,' sighed Thay with resignation.

'Doesn't have to be. All forms of life have great potential. But only those few get the chance to achieve it. Others have it stolen from them.'

'What about it?' Thay was growing bored of this.

'What if I told you I could alter the very fabric of reality? Have done so for centuries, moving from place to place. Did you know there is a myth that says writers are merely conduits for a higher being who provides knowledge? That divine knowledge filters through the writer, becoming stories. I could do that for you.'

'What if I don't believe you?'

'You have seen what I can do.' The Magician smiled. 'What have you got to lose? Besides, if you still don't have faith, you could argue what I provide is merely a placebo to get your writing fluids flowing.'

As he said this, the Magician held his hands out in offering, and Thay saw markings on his palms. Cut into the flesh, a pentagram on his right hand, and an octagon on the left. There was certainly something otherworldly about this man, and Thay had to admit it. He had seen all the Magician could do. If he was wrong, maybe this would just be the inspiration he needed to write his masterpiece.

‘Okay, let’s do it,’ Thay finally said.

‘Before we go on, I need you to remember something. What you are about to receive is not a gift, more of a loan. When your time is up, it will be taken away, along with interest,’ speaking with a smile that showed Thay the extent of this Faustian deal.

‘How long will I have?’

‘Eight years. Do we have a deal?’

The Magician held out his pentagram engraved hand. With no hesitation, Thay took it. At the moment their hands met, the Magician clasped his left hand over Thay’s, clamping his hand tight. Thay could feel a pulsating through his hand, as if something were passing between the two symbols. This pulsating feeling moved throughout his body, and the air surrounding him crackled to life. He grew weaker at the knees and drowsy, and he found himself unable to look away from the Magician, whose eyes glowed.

‘When the Evening Star creates the Great Star,’ his voice echoing as he spoke, ‘one will come to collect the bounty. I hereby grant you power over the words. Use it wisely.’

The moment he finished speaking, the light burning from the Magician’s eyes glowed even brighter, filling the room, and that was when Thay blacked out.

When Thay came to the next morning, he was alone. Thinking it was nothing but a dream, he went over to his iPad, which had went to standby, and set himself to write. Nothing happened. As he thought, there was no magic, he must have dreamt it all through exhaustion. Leaving his dreams of writing, he got himself prepared for another laboring day of work.

However, it all changed when he got home and switched on the news. It was the talk throughout Afsut all day. In a cabin in some forest, a body had been found. A teenage girl, stripped and mutilated, showing signs of years of abuse, in what could only be described as a torture room. It was confirmed she was a young girl who went missing eight years ago.

From this, Thay wrote and wrote for hours. As it was the weekend, he wrote for two days straight, stopping only for bodily needs. He wrote until what was soon called *Amazon* was created.

Inspired by the true events, *Amazon* told the story of a young girl abducted from a playground and forced into years of abuse and torture by a sick doctor. The girl endures ten years of this, suffering abuse at the hands of the doctor and his friends, and even savagely operated on, her breasts removed and her uterus and ovaries mutilated. Then, the girl escapes, killing her captives, taking on a feral nature in the woods, killing men and mutilating women to look like her.

Exhausted, Thay completed the story and emailed it to a publisher. Six weeks later, he got a reply he did not expect. The story was accepted.

A year later, it was published and was considered a major success. Like many famous authors, Thay entered the same category overnight. Millions of copies sold in one day, Thay Bennett became a worldwide name.

Of course, a follow on novel was expected, and Thay, as if possessed by a demon, delivered one in the form of *Toy Boy*. This was the story of a silent and depressed school boy who has a relationship with his art teacher. However, after a year of this affair, she breaks it off and he snaps, breaking into the school, covering her in clay, molding her into a sexually suggestive and aggressive statue, only to place it, with her still inside it, into the kiln, with him going off to drown himself in a nearby lake. He followed this with *The Cousin*, where a youth becomes dangerously obsessed with his older cousin, leading to murder, drugging and abusing his cousin, and eventually abducting and torturing others while he remains hidden from the authorities.

Sensing that people were feeling he was a one-genre man, Thay then turned the tables with his science fiction trilogy, *Genopolis*. The series focused on a future where society is split in two. The perfect, rich, genetically modified Gens at the top, and the normal, struggling humans known as Norms. The first book, subtitled *Survival of the Species*, centered on a Gen becoming disillusioned with his privileged life, and becoming entangled with a beautiful Norm and a terrorist group of humans known as Purebloods, wishing to free the Norms. The novel ended with the revelation that Gens were never born or genetically superior. Whenever they aged or were injured, their memories were updated into clones repeatedly to give the impression of fast healing and long lifespans and extended youth.

The second part, *Origin of the Species*, focused on a man who showed strange developments of speed, strength, ability, senses and healing. It was revealed he was also showing signs of evolution, and the scientists hunted him down, in a hope of using his DNA to create Genopolis. A task they found impossible, which resulted in the cloning process. The final part, *Evolution*, returned to the future, where the main characters of the first meet a genetically modified Gen who carried a virus to destroy all Norms.

A trilogy of movies was currently under development for these novels.

And now, at the final stages of his eight years, he was on his latest project, *Mummy's Boy*, and he couldn't go any further.

***

'Mr. Bennett,' the Repo-man pressed on, bringing Thay out of his thoughts, 'it is time.'

'Please, listen, I have just one story left to do. Just give me enough time to finish it off.'

Although he couldn't see through the scarf, Thay knew the Repo-man was giving him a mocking grin as he walked over to his briefcase. Turning the combination locks, so every number on the dials read eight, he opened the case, from which a bright light illuminated, and pulled out a clipboard. Although Thay couldn't see it, he knew his information was on there.

'I assure you, Mr. Bennett, you are not the first one to ask me that. Besides, it is too late.'

'What do you mean?' Thay trembled, the fear raging through him. In the distance, he heard the people of the town shouting. Was there something happening?

'Our deals are very precise, Mr. Bennett. The eight years' deadline is to the very second you shake the hand of my associate. That was an hour ago, I was running a little late. The interest has started.'

'What interest?' His hairs were standing on end as the noises became louder, and closer.

From a nearby bookcase, the Repo-man pulled out a series of hardcover books. Thay's books, and stood them upright, side by side.

'My associate explained you would be a conduit for something else. Something we are associated with. Through you, our associate created these

works of art, laced with subliminal messages. Messages for terrorists, sexual predators, lunatics… the list is endless. When the exact eight years had ended, these messages became apparent, and it is now all over the news. You are now infamous for sending secret messages to terrorists, pedophile rings, and for triggering psychopaths.'

The noise smashed into Thay's mind at the same time of the realization. It was the people of Afsut, enraged by his apparent perversions. Eight years ago, children went missing when a biker gang roared through. A gang who it turned out were innocent. No doubt, he was going to be associated with what happened to the children.

Suddenly, a window smashed in, followed by a Molotov cocktail. The rich, antique wood furniture went up in flames instantly. At the same time, a rock came crashing through another window, striking Thay on the head. Dazed and bleeding heavily, he fell to his knees, unable to see straight. He was just able to see the raging flames, and the dark figure of the Repo-man placing the books in his shining briefcase and disappearing into the flames.

More rocks and cocktails came crashing through the windows. Unable to move, despite the pain, Thay just laid there as the flames licked at his flesh. He couldn't breathe, no matter how low he lay to get away from the rising smoke. It was low enough to reach him.

All he could think about was wanting this to be over. He became famous overnight, now he was infamous. Infamous at the expense of so many lives, just because he wanted to become known for something he loved to do, even though he never had the talent for it. And that was something he couldn't live with.

About: *Carl Thomas Fox*

Born and raised in Swansea, Carl lives with his fiancé of five years, Samantha Smith, a teacher in a local Primary School in the next village, and their two daughters. Carl also works with children, a teaching assistant in the reception area of another Primary School, in which he runs a creative writing club to help children write stories, and in fact the children won a local writing competition, where their stories have been published.

Highly imaginative and prolific, Carl has written several short stories and several novels, including children's picture books, currently trying to get published, and is creating vast mythologies and many languages, done as full dictionaries with every word able to translate with letters and numbers. Primarily of horror, but also of thrillers, science fiction, sword and sorcery and fantasy and children's novels and picture books. Carl also has skills as an artist, through which he develops own covers, symbols and letters.

As a pagan with a deep interest in the occult and ancient mythologies, Carl tries to use as much of this as he can in his writing. In fact, of all the stories he has written, and the others he is planning to write, over a hundred, they will all be part of what is known as the Wellworlds mythology. A singular mythology that all work focuses on, almost mirroring the Norse idea of Yggdrasil, the tree that all worlds are connected to. This is a life-long work that he is deeply focused on.

If you wish to read one of Carl Fox's novels, he had placed it on Facebook a while back. It is called The Wolf God, a horror novel about werewolves searching for the final solution.

You can find him on Facebook at carl.fox.5454@facebook.com.

THE KNIFE

By

Todd Nelsen

"Wanna see it?"

It was the type of question a devil would ask a saint, the sort of thing a flasher would say to a little girl in a park. And I was buying every word of it. My anticipation was almost unbearable. "Can I? Really?" I asked.

My uncle tossed the bag on the dining room table and undid the drawstring; the sound of the leather made a swishing, slipping sound as it came open. "Go ahead," he said with a smile and stepped back, giving me some room. "Take a look. Knock yourself out, buddy boy."

I chewed on my bottom lip, listening for the familiar sound of a car pulling into the drive, the jangling and turning of a key, the door to the living room opening, signaling the arrival of my parents. If they came home early and saw what I was up to? Man, I'd be fucked. They'd ground me for sure this time. Uncle Jack wasn't supposed to be here. I'd let him in, and that was way against house rules. Jack may have been my all-time favorite relative, but he did some pretty weird shit with his spare time. Jack didn't have a job. There was often talk of drugs. Best to stay away from him unattended, Dad said, except on birthdays, holidays, Christmas, maybe Easter, if that "idiot brother of mine" was lucky. I liked Jack, but Dad was right in this respect, I guess. What was in that bag wasn't for a thirteen year old kid; it wasn't a cute little puppy in there.

"Chicken?"

I recognized the tactic immediately. Jack was taunting me, daring me, just like a couple of kids on a playground. Jack liked to tease. I think he got a real kick out of it.

I stared at the bag on the dining room table, my *parent's* dining room table. Nah, I wasn't scared. This was something different. What did they call it in school? Misbehaving. Was I being a bad boy? I often wondered what my uncle was like when he was my age. There probably wasn't a day in his life he hadn't misbehaved. Are some people born that way? Born bad? I wondered. My grandparents, Jack's parents, seemed all right. In fact,

they were the most loving and conscientious people I knew. My grandma wouldn't let me cross the street without looking both ways or leave the house before checking to see if my shoes were tied. My dad seemed pretty okay, too. Maybe Jack had fallen in with the wrong crowd when he was younger, did all the shit you weren't supposed to… and, in his words, had "a hell of a lot of fun doing it."

"Well, hell, if you ain't interested --" He started to reach for it.

"No, wait," I said. I was fearful he'd take it away. "I said, I'd look. I'll look. And don't call me chicken," I added.

That wicked smile, again. "I knew you wouldn't wuss out on me, buddy boy. You've always been my favorite." He affectionately rubbed the top of my head. I pulled back; I wasn't six anymore. He didn't seem to mind this, though. "Go ahead, Charlie," he urged. "You know, before *they* get home."

I nodded - he was right; we didn't have a lot of time; my parents would be back soon - and peered into the bag. I didn't touch, however. Maybe I was scared after all. I bet I looked like some old lady inspecting fruit at the supermarket, the way I was hovering over it.

"Here, let me help," he said, and he stepped around me and reached in, pulling it out. It was a rectangular bundle, about 8 inches in length, carefully wrapped in an old shirt. "Be careful," he warned, genuinely meaning it. "It's sharp."

He handed the bundle to me.

I gawked back at him, like I didn't understand what he was saying. I'd taken it, but my hands were shaking. I didn't know what to do with it.

"Unwrap it," he said.

He chuckled and snatched the bundle back. Unwrapping it and handing it back to me, he said: "It's the real thing, Charlie boy. It's not a movie prop or some bullshit knock off. Look closely at the blade. See the blood?"

He said it like it was the coolest of things. It reminded me of the last horror movie I'd seen. *Ya wanna see somethin' really scary?* Now that it was out of the bag, unwrapped, and in my hands, I felt less intimidated. My curiosity took over then. I raised it up to the light. I didn't see blood, like Jack said I would. He was bullshitting me on that account. Uncle Jack did have a tendency to exaggerate. Still -- "He really used this?" I asked, turning it in the light. I choked a little, not entirely believing.

“Yep,” he said, his eyes twinkling. He was obviously getting a kick out of this. “On 30 of ’em, he did. The rest --” He put his hands out in front of him and cupped them furiously. “He strangled. Griffith said it was more --”

“Much more satisfying,″ I finished for him. “And it was 48, not 30, Uncle Jack.”

Jack shrugged, as if to say, *you know better than I do, kid*, and went silent.

I was right, though. I didn’t need to be told. I knew everything about Lester Griffith. Some kids collected Pokémon. I collected serial killers; well, I didn’t officially collect them per se. I just knew a lot about them: watched the movies, downloaded the documentaries, read the books. It was a passion of mine, and my uncle knew it. Lester Griffith was something special, though. By the time they’d caught him, he’d got himself 81. That was three times Ackerman, 10 more than Red Lake. And in my hands now, my hands, was the murder weapon of one of the most prolific serial killers the United States had ever seen. This wasn’t the Silence of the Lambs or Friday the 13th or Psycho here. Like Jack said, screw all that movie bullshit.

This was the real deal, buddy boy.

Jack's tongue was out, in a comical imitation of some poor victim getting the life choked out of them. Another time it might have been funny, and I might have laughed, but I barely noticed.

Wow, I thought, turning it in the light… the knife of Lester Griffith. I was hypnotized.

“What will you give for it?” he asked.

My heart stopped.

“100 bucks?”

I looked at him. I was speechless.

“How about 50?” he asked. “I could part with it for 50.”

“I don’t have that kind of money,” I said. After all, I was just a thirteen year old kid!

Suddenly, I heard the sound of gravel on the drive and a car door shutting.

“What *do* you have, Charlie boy?”

“10 bucks. I have 10 bucks.”

“Let’s see it.”

I reached into my pocket and held it out to him.

“Done,” Jack said. And he took the money, snatched up his bag, and bolted out the back door, leaving the knife in my hands.

For the next few days, I was one of the coolest kids at school - at the very least, the weirdest. Pokémon? Shit. Fuck Pokémon. We’re talking Lester Griffith here, man.

“Wanna see it?”

It was the type of question a devil would ask a saint, the sort of thing a sixteen year old says to his virgin girlfriend.

“Well, you wanna or not?”

It wasn’t until later, when I was sitting in the principal’s office with my mother, and she recognized the knife from her own cutlery, that I realized Uncle Jack had pulled a fast one on me.

About: *Todd Nelsen*

Todd Nelsen’s literary and film interests include horror, fantasy, and science fiction. He cites Stephen King, Robert E. Howard, and Hermann Hesse as influences. He is an avid fan of metal music and currently resides in Denver, Colorado, where he writes, reads, and is constantly fantasizing. His short fiction has been featured in numerous publications, including *Schlock! The Pulpateers* and *Tales of the Undead – Hell Whore Volume III.*

TRINKET

By

Gary Murphy

Jolene Peters sat in the dressing room, rehearsing her lines before the huge mirror in the Old Viper Theater House. There was a good hour to go before the main performance but Jolene had joined the cast late due to her predecessor's untimely passing, which actually occurred right here in this very same dressing room before she went out to perform on stage.

She was uncomfortable with the chalky cosmetics, going so far as to ask the boss if she could do her performances make-up-free, but the boss being the boss, he had to insist that her wearing the make-up invigorated the play. Jolene hadn't protested as this was her first shot at a theater production and she didn't want to blow her chances before they even began.

She shared the dressing room with four others, who were just as nervy as her, rehearsing their lines and cursing loudly whenever they tripped over their tongues in mid-flow. Because that was the secret – the art itself – to maintain a flow, create yourself as the centre of attention, hook the audience into believing the crap you spoke on stage was actually a reflection on normal life. Of course, half the time it wasn't, but the secret was to suspend the audience's belief.

Jolene suddenly reached for the lip gloss when she accidentally brushed it with the back of her hand, knocking it down into a gap between the table and the wall. Because it was a tight gap, and this was the only gloss available tonight, she had to fish it out somehow, eventually opting for a wire coat-hanger to tease it out from between the thin gap. It was a tight squeeze, but as she fished it, she discovered something else, an old, perhaps-silver trinket that emerged alongside the lip gloss, and Jolene was joyful for the discovery.

'Oooh,' she said, 'I've found a piece of jewelry – it's either silver, or maybe white gold – even has emeralds.'

She turned to show the others but was surprised to discover she was now alone in the dressing room. She didn't know where the others had scarpered to. Probably signing autographs… *"Darling!"*

Jolene toyed with the glistening trinket, a flowery, multi-stoned colorful piece of kit which wouldn't have gone amiss in a jewelry shop window. It was exquisite, had a quaintness all of its own, and how long it had been stuck in that gap next to the dresser would always be a mystery. It was a badge of some kind, typically female in essence, and as Jolene scrutinized it closely she felt a strange warmth surge in her breast, like the badge was actually a personality that wished to speak its mind, tell of its years hidden without being displayed like it deserved.

'You're a beauty, aren't you?' Jolene said, like she was speaking to a pet dog.

Suddenly the pin accidentally nipped her right index finger and Jolene yelped at the sting. This thing was pretty, yes – but darn it, it had a temper, she thought as she laughed. She sucked the blood from the wound, and was surprised to see such a steady flow oozing forth as a crimson torrent. Damn it, she thought – it was only a nip – but it seemed more of a fucking shark bite!

'Fucker,' she said, wrapping it in a facial wipe.

It seemed a long time before the blood stemmed and when it did, it was a profound relief, Jolene thinking childishly it would have continued into the night. She cleaned the trinket with the facial wipe, scrubbing a decade's dust from its craggy surface, and used yet another wipe just to make it glimmer and twinkle in the glow from the dressing table's bare light bulbs, those which were fitted around the edges of the mirror.

When the knock on the dressing room door sounded, meaning it was time to go and act, she buttoned the obscure little item of jewelry to her left breast, thinking, you never knew, it might bring her a modicum of luck.

Her finger still bled profusely as she made her way blindly through the complex, activity-starved tunnels leading to the stage, knowing she was instrumental to the opening scene, where she would deliver an awe-inspiring speech from Shakespeare. It meant she didn't have to wait around, just go straight on and do her stuff in front of a packed audience.

She paused in the wings as she listened to the buzz of the crowd. Then she made her entrance in a mad, vapid rush and simply stormed the empty stage.

Smiling, she looked out into the audience, only for the smile to abruptly disappear and be replaced by an expression of horror as she viewed her public.

***

The audience was just a vast, vivid portrait of rotting death, and for as far back in the auditorium as she could see all that was there was a jittering, groaning crowd of moving and talking corpses. She looked more closely into the second row and watched a festering zombie reach out to its decaying neighbour, tug at, and snap off its right ear, then place it in its mouth and start chewing hungrily as the neighbour merely looked on.

Jolene shivered and screamed as the audience chattered with mocking laughter and yet more guttural moans as some of the noise even went so far as to mimic the actress and her vocal output. It was as though they were viewing a comedy or pantomime.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, Jolene noticed the brooch pinned to her breast started to pulsate steadily with a muted green glow, the emeralds in its cluster summoning the crowd to storm the stage each and every one.

The audience jeered and laughed at this pathetic carbon copy of entertainment in its poorest form – a woman, acting Shakespeare, who had either suffered stage-fright, forgotten her lines, or both.

Running back to the dressing room was out of the question with these monsters so close they could follow her; they could trap her, burst in and have their wicked ways with her – which probably meant getting devoured, if the movies were right – so Jolene madly spun on her heels and headed for the theater backdoor that led into the street.

She burst head-on into a congested Leicester Square, sucking in the oxygen as her heart battered the lungs in her chest. She looked around, desperately seeking assistance, or support, any support, only to find Leicester Square wasn't Leicester Square anymore, but an apocalyptic hive for Undead activity.

Despairing, she held her head and screamed, 'Leave me alone, you bastards!'

She collapsed onto her knees in the gutter, and since all she could determine was that she was probably about to be eaten by the walking dead coming in her direction, swarming together to conquer a hot meal, she knew this was finally it, the passing of an actress who lived her life as best she

could, didn't bother or harm a soul, who lived in London and continuously dreamt of that big filmic role.

'This fucking thing,' she said, tearing the brooch from her breast. 'I've never had so much bad luck…'

'Then hand it back, young lady,' came a searing voice. When Jolene looked up at the shadowed zombie standing over her, it was that which had once been a woman, reaching out her hand to Jolene.

The zombie-like, Edwardian-attired old lady - an actress, Jolene knew - grabbed the brooch from her breast.

'I've been searching for this all my undead existence. Now, my dear, I can probably rest in peace…'

Once the little trinket was removed from her, Jolene's eyes widened as Leicester Square transformed back into the futuristic, neon metropolis it had been since she was a girl. The apocalyptic mood lifted as the swarming, blood-soaked creatures faded and vanished from the immediate vicinity.

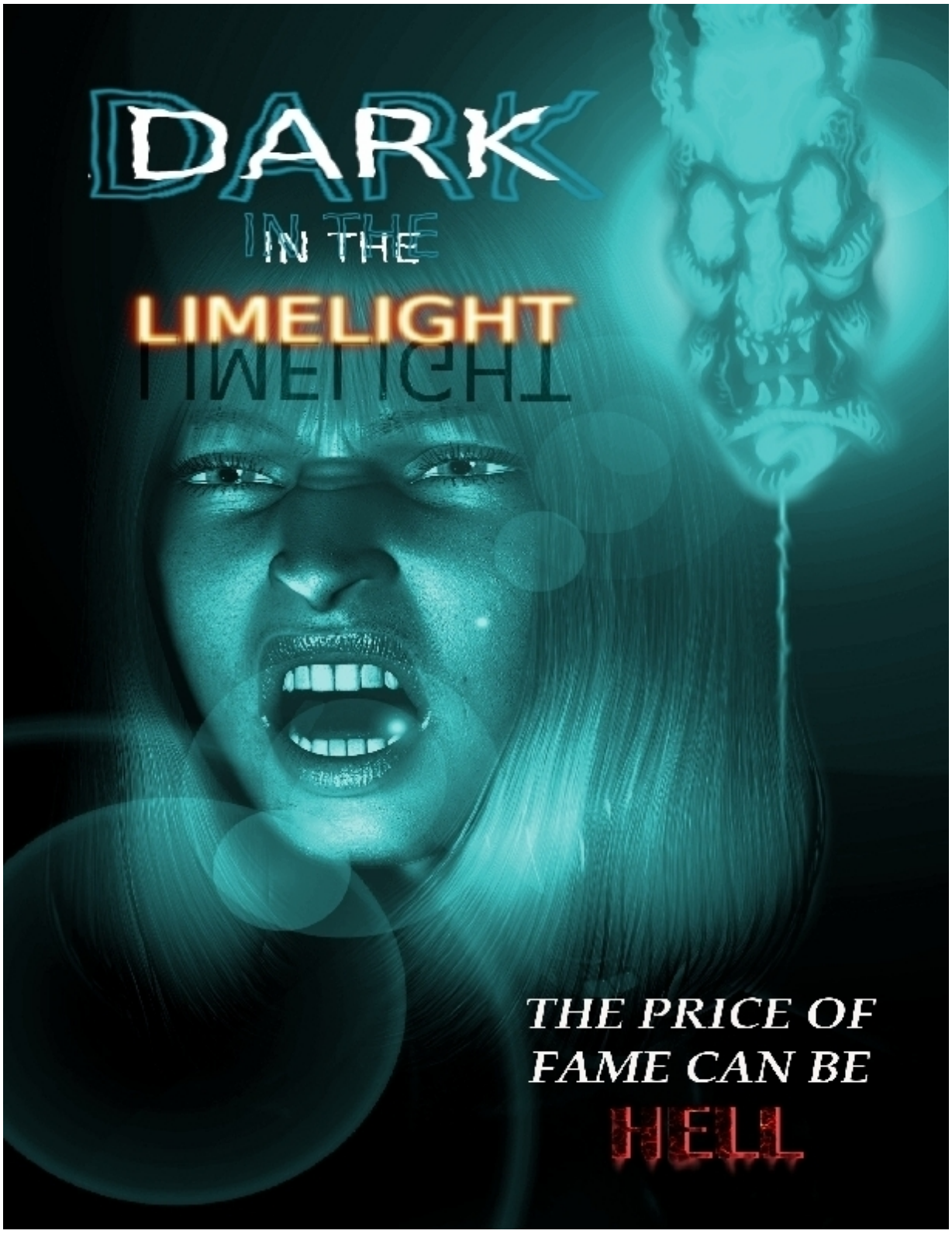
She stood and pondered going back into the Old Viper Theater House.

'No,' she said. 'I think I'll miss tonight's performance. Shakespeare won't die in a hurry…'

About: *Gary Murphy*

Born January 29th, 1969, **Gary Murphy** is the author of collections 'Scared Dog' and 'Psychosocial', and the novella 'Adrenalinyte – Dark Romance'. He is happy living in Egremont, West Cumbria, where he rides a black Vespa and enjoys walking his dog, Chewy. He is a full-time writer, in between buying and selling his first love, antiques.

Available from Lulu.com


DARK
IN THE
LIMELIGHT
THE PRICE OF
FAME CAN BE
HELL